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THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION

T HE IDEA FOR this title comes from Michèle Barrett's feeling that the politics of translation takes on a massive life of its own if you see language as the process of meaning construction.[1]

In my view, language may be one of many elements that allow us to make sense of things, of ourselves. I am thinking, of course, of gestures, pauses, but also of chance, of the sub-individual force-fields of being which click into place in different situations, swerve from the straight or true line of language-in-thought. Making sense of ourselves is what produces identity. If one feels that the production of identity as self-meaning, not just meaning, is as pluralized as a drop of water under a microscope, one is not always satisfied, outside of the ethicopolitical arena as such, with "generating" thoughts on one's own. (Assuming identity as origin may be unsatisfactory in the ethico-political arena as well, but consideration of that now would take us too far afield.) One of the ways to get around the confines of one's "identity" as one produces expository prose is to work at someone else's title, as one works with a language that belongs to many others. This, after all, is one of the seductions of translating. It is a simple miming of the responsibility to the trace of the other in the self.

Responding, therefore, to Michèle with that freeing sense of responsibility, I can agree that it is not bodies of meaning that are transferred in translation. And from the ground of that agreement I want to consider the role played by language for the *agent,* the person who acts, even though intention is not fully present to itself. The task of the feminist translator is to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency. The writer is written by her language, of course. But the writing of the writer writes agency in a way that might be different from that of the British woman/citizen with the history of British feminism, focused on the task of freeing

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herself from Britain's imperial past, its often racist present, as well as its "made in Britain" history of male domination.

Translation as reading

How does the translator attend to the specificity of the language she translates? There is a way in which the rhetorical nature of every language disrupts its logical systematicity. If we emphasize the logical at the expense of these rhetorical interferences, we remain safe. "Safety" *is* the appropriate term here, because we are talking of risks, of violence to the translating medium.

I felt that I was taking those risks when I recently translated some late eighteenth-century Bengali poetry. I quote a bit from my "Translator's Preface":

> I must overcome what I was taught in school: the highest mark for the most accurate collection of synonyms, strung together in the most proximate syntax. I must resist both the solemnity of chaste Victorian poetic prose and the forced simplicity of "plain English", that have imposed themselves as the norm... Translation is the most intimate act of reading. I surrender to the text when I translate. These songs, sung day after day in family chorus before clear memory began, have a peculiar intimacy for me. Reading and surrendering take on new meanings in such a case. The translator earns permission to transgress from the trace of the other—before memory—in the closest places of the self.[2]

Language is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries. The ways in which rhetoric or figuration disrupt logic themselves point at the possibility of random contingency, beside language, around language. Such a *diss*emination cannot be under our control. Yet in translation, where meaning hops into the spacy emptiness between two named historical languages, we get perilously close to it. By juggling the disruptive rhetoricity that breaks the surface in not necessarily connected ways, we feel the selvedges of the language-textile give way, fray into *frayages* or facilitations.[3] Although every act of reading or communication is a bit of this risky fraying which scrambles together somehow, our stake in agency keeps the fraying down to a minimum except in the communication and reading of and in love. (What is the place of "love" in the ethical?) The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay. The politics of translation from a non-European woman's text too often suppresses this possibility because the translator cannot engage with, or cares insufficiently for, the rhetoricity of the original.

The simple possibility that something might not be meaningful is contained by the rhetorical system as the always possible menace of a space outside language. This is most eerily staged (and challenged) in the effort to communicate with other possible intelligent beings in space. (Absolute alterity or otherness is thus

differed-deferred into an other self who resembles us, however minimally, and with whom we can communicate.) But a more homely staging of it occurs across two earthly languages. The experience of contained alterity in an unknown language spoken in a different cultural milieu is uncanny.

Let us now think that, in that other language, rhetoric may be disrupting logic in the matter of the production of an agent, and indicating the founding violence of the silence at work within rhetoric. Logic allows us to jump from word to word by means of clearly indicated connections. Rhetoric must work in the silence between and around words in order to see what works and how much. The jagged relationship between rhetoric and logic, condition and effect of knowing, is a relationship by which a world is made for the agent, so that the agent can act in an ethical way, a political way, a day-to-day way; so that the agent can be alive, in a human way, in the world. Unless one can at least construct a model of this for the other language, there is no real translation.

Unfortunately it is only too easy to produce translations if this task is completely ignored. I myself see no choice between the quick and easy and slapdash way, and translating well and with difficulty. There is no reason why a responsible translation should take more time in the doing. The translator's preparation might take more time, and her love for the text might be a matter of a reading skill that takes patience. But the sheer material production of the text need not be slow.

Without a sense of the rhetoricity of language, a species of neo-colonialist construction of the non-western scene is afoot. No argument for convenience can be persuasive here. That is always the argument, it seems. This is where I travel from Michèle Barrett's enabling notion of the question of language in poststructuralism. Post-structuralism has shown some of us a staging of the agent within a three-tiered notion of language (as rhetoric, logic, silence). We must attempt to enter or direct that staging, as one directs a play, as an actor interprets a script. That takes a different kind of effort from taking translation to be a matter of synonym, syntax and local colour.

To be only critical, to defer action until the production of the utopian translator, is impractical. Yet, when I hear Derrida, quite justifiably, point out the difficulties between French and English, even when he agrees to speak in English—"I must speak in a language that is not my own because that will be more just"—I want to claim the right to the same dignified complaint for a woman's text in Arabic or Vietnamese.[4]

It is more just to give access to the largest number of feminists. Therefore these texts must be made to speak English. It is more just to speak the language of the majority when through hospitality a large number of feminists give the foreign feminists the right to speak, in English. In the case of the Third World foreigner, is the law of the majority that of decorum, the equitable law of democracy, or the "law" of the strongest? We might focus on this confusion. There is nothing necessarily meretricious about the western feminist gaze. (The "naturalizing" of Jacques Lacan's sketching out of the psychic structure of the gaze in terms of group political behaviour has always seemed to me a bit shaky.) On the other hand, there is nothing essentially noble about the law of the majority either. It is merely the easiest way of being "democratic" with minorities. In the act of wholesale

translation into English there can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest. This happens when all the literature of the Third World gets translated into a sort of with-it translatese, so that the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan. The rhetoricity of Chinese and Arabic! The cultural politics of high-growth, capitalist Asia-Pacific, and devastated West Asia! Gender difference inscribed and inscribing in these differences!

For the student, this tedious translatese cannot compete with the spectacular stylistic experiments of a Monique Witting or an Alice Walker.

Let us consider an example where attending to the author's stylistic experiments can produce a different text. Mahasweta Devi's "Stanadāyini" is available in two versions.[5] Devi has expressed approval for the attention to her signature style in the version entitled "Breast-giver". The alternative translation gives the title as "The Wet-nurse", and thus neutralizes the author's irony in constructing an uncanny word; enough like "wet-nurse" to make that sense, and enough unlike to shock. It is as if the translator should decide to translate Dylan Thomas's famous title and opening line as "Do not go gently into that good night". The theme of treating the breast as organ of labour-power-as-commodity and the breast as metonymie part-object standing in for other-as-object—the way in which the story plays with Marx and Freud on the occasion of the woman's body—is lost even before you enter the story. In the text Mahasweta uses proverbs that are startling even in the Bengali. The translator of "The Wet-nurse" leaves them out. She decides not to try to translate these hard bits of earthy wisdom, contrasting with class-specific access to modernity, also represented in the story. In fact, if the two translations are read side by side, the loss of the rhetorical silences of the original can be felt from one to the other.

First, then, the translator must surrender to the text. She must solicit the text to show the limits of its language, because that rhetorical aspect will point at the silence of the absolute fraying of language that the text wards off, in its special manner. Some think this is just an ethereal way of talking about literature or philosophy. But no amount of tough talk can get around the fact that translation is the most intimate act of reading. Unless the translator has earned the right to become the intimate reader, she cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text.

The presupposition that women have a natural or narrative-historical solidarity, that there is something in a woman or an undifferentiated women's story that speaks to another woman without benefit of language-learning, might stand against the translator's task of surrender. Paradoxically, it is not possible for us as ethical agents to imagine otherness or alterity maximally. We have to turn the other into something like the self in order to be ethical. To surrender in translation is more erotic than ethical.[6] In that situation the good-willing attitude "she is just like me" is not very helpful. In so far as Michèle Barrett is not like Gayatri Spivak, their friendship is more effective as a translation. In order to earn that right of friendship or surrender of identity, of knowing that the rhetoric of the text indicates the limits of language for you as long as you are with the text, you have to be in a different relationship with the language, not even only with the specific text.

Learning about translation on the job, I came to think that it would be a practical help if one's relationship with the language being translated was such that sometimes one preferred to speak in it about intimate things. This is no more than a practical suggestion, not a theoretical requirement, useful especially because a woman writer who is wittingly or unwittingly a "feminist"—and of course all woman writers are not "feminist" even in this broad sense—will relate to the three-part staging of (agency in) language in ways defined out as "private", since they might question the more public linguistic manoeuvres.

Let us consider an example of lack of intimacy with the medium. In Sudhir Kakar's *The Inner World,* a song about Kālī written by the late nineteenth-century monk Vivekananda is cited as part of the proof of the "archaic narcissism" of the Indian [sic] male.[7] (Devi makes the same point with a light touch, with reference to Krsna and Siva, tying it to sexism rather than narcissim and without psychoanalytic patter.)

From Kakar's description, it would not be possible to glimpse that "the disciple" who gives the account of the singular circumstances of Vivekananda's composition of the song was an Irishwoman who became a Ramakrishna nun, a white woman among male Indian monks and devotees. In the account Kakar reads, the song is translated by this woman, whose training in intimacy with the original language is as painstaking as one can hope for. There is a strong identification between Indian and Irish nationalists at this period; and Nivedita, as she was called, also embraced what she understood to be the Indian philosophical way of life as explained by Vivekananda, itself a peculiar, resistant consequence of the culture of imperialism, as has been pointed out by many. For a psychoanalyst like Kakar, this historical, philosophical and indeed sexual text of translation should be the textile to weave with. Instead, the English version, "given" by the anonymous "disciple", serves as no more than the opaque exhibit providing evidence of the alien fact of narcissism. It is not the site of the exchange of language.

At the beginning of the passage quoted by Kakar, there is a reference to Ram Prasad (or Ram Proshad). Kakar provides a footnote: "Eighteenth century singer and poet whose songs of longing for the Mother are very popular in Bengal". I believe this footnote is also an indication of what I am calling the absence of intimacy.

Vivekananda is, among other things, an example of the peculiar reactive construction of a glorious "India" under the provocation of imperialism. The rejection of "patriotism" in favour of "Kālī" reported in Kakar's passage is played out in this historical theatre, as a choice of the cultural female sphere rather than the colonial male sphere.[8] It is undoubtedly "true" that for such a figure, Ram Proshad Sen provides a kind of ideal self. Sen had travelled back from a clerk's job in colonial Calcutta before the Permanent Settlement of land in 1793 to be the court poet of one of the great rural landowners whose social type, and whose connection to native culture, would be transformed by the Settlement. In other words, Vivekananda and Ram Proshad are two moments of colonial discursivity translating the figure of Kālī. The dynamic intricacy of that discursive textile is mocked by the useless footnote.

It would be idle here to enter the debate about the "identity" of Kālī or indeed other goddesses in Hindu "polytheism". But simply to contextualize, let me add

that it is Ram Proshad about whose poetry I wrote the "Translator's Preface" quoted earlier. He is by no means simply an archaic stage-prop in the disciple's account of Vivekananda's "crisis". Some more lines from my "Preface": "Ram Proshad played with his mother tongue, transvaluing the words that are heaviest with Sanskrit meaning. I have been unable to catch the utterly new but utterly gendered tone of affectionate banter"—not only, not even largely, "longing"—"between the poet and Kāli." Unless Nivedita mistranslated, it is the difference in tone between Ram Proshad's innovating playfulness and Vivekananda's high nationalist solemnity that, in spite of the turn from nationalism to the Mother, is historically significant. The politics of the translation of the culture of imperialism by the colonial subject has changed noticeably. And that change is expressed in the gendering of the poet's voice.

How do women in contemporary polytheism relate to this peculiar mother, certainly not the psychoanalytic bad mother whom Kakar derives from Max Weber's misreading, not even an organized punishing mother, but a child-mother who punishes with astringent violence and is also a moral and affective monitor?[9] Ordinary women, not saintly women. Why take it for granted that the invocation of goddesses in a historically masculist polytheist sphere is necessarily feminist? I think it is a western and male-gendered suggestion that powerful women in the Sākta (Sakti or Kāli-worshipping) tradition take Kāli as a role model.[10]

Mahasweta's Jashoda tells me more about the relationship between goddesses and strong ordinary women than the psychoanalyst. And here too the example of an intimate translation that goes respectfully "wrong" can be offered. The French wife of a Bengali artist translated some of Ram Proshad Sen's songs in the twenties to accompany her husband's paintings based on the songs. Her translations are marred by the pervasive orientalism ready at hand as a discursive system. Compare two passages, both translating the "same" Bengali. I have at least tried, if failed, to catch the unrelenting mockery of self and Kāli in the original:

> Mind, why footloose from Mother?
> Mind mine, think power, for freedom's dower, bind bower with
>   love-rope
> In time, mind, you minded not your blasted lot.
> And Mother, daughter-like, bound up house-fence to dupe her dense
>   and devoted fellow.
> Oh you'll see at death how much Mum loves you
> A couple minutes' tears, and lashings of water, cowdung-pure.

Here is the French, translated by me into an English comparable in tone and vocabulary:

> Pourquoi as-tu, mon âme, délaissé les pieds de Mâ?
> O esprit, médite Shokti, tu obtiendras la délivrance.
> Attache-les ces pieds saints avec la corde de la dévotion.
> Au bon moment tu n'as rien vu, c'est bien là ton malheur.
> Pour se jouer de son fidèle, Elle m'est apparue
> Sous la forme de ma fille et m'a aidé à réparer ma clôture.

C'est à la mort que tu comprendras l'amour de Mâ.
Ici, on versera quelques larmes, puis on purifiera le lieu.

Why have you, my soul [*mon âme* is, admittedly, less heavy in French],
    left Ma's feet?
O mind, meditate upon Shokti, you will obtain deliverance.
Bind those holy feet with the rope of devotion.
In good time you saw nothing, that is indeed your sorrow.
To play with her faithful one, She appeared to me
In the form of my daughter and helped me to repair my enclosure.
It is at death that you will understand Ma's love.
Here, they will shed a few tears, then purify the place.

And here the Bengali:

মন কেন তার চরণ-ছাড়া ।
ও মন, তার শক্তি, পায়ে ভুতি, বাঁধ দিয়ে ভক্তি-দড়া ॥
সময় থাকতে, না দেখলে মন, কেমন তোমার কপালপোড়া ।
ছল করে তুলিতে, তমরা রূপেতে রাখিন আমি ধারের বেড়া ॥
সময়ে মত ভানালে, তুবা যাবে ছূত্যুমতু-
সোন দুও-দুটর ক্রন্নারগানি, শেষ দিবে গোবরছড়া ।

I hope these examples demonstrate that depth of commitment to correct cultural politics, felt in the details of personal life, is sometimes not enough. The history of the language, the history of the author's moment, the history of the language-in-and-as-translation, must figure in the weaving as well.

By logical analysis, we don't just mean what the philosopher does, but also reasonableness—that which will allow rhetoricity to be appropriated, put in its place, situated, seen as only nice. Rhetoricity is put in its place that way because it disrupts. Women within male-dominated society, when they internalize sexism as normality, act out a scenario against feminism that is formally analogical to this. The relationship between logic and rhetoric, between grammar and rhetoric, is also a relationship between social logic, social reasonableness and the disruptiveness of figuration in social practice. These are the first two parts of our three-part model. But then, rhetoric points at the possibility of randomness, of contingency as such, dissemination, the falling apart of language, the possibility that things might not always be semiotically organized. (My problem with Kristeva and the "pre-semiotic" is that she seems to want to expand the empire of the meaning-ful by grasping at what language can only point at.) Cultures that might not have this specific three-part model will still have a dominant sphere in its traffic with language and contingency. Writers like Ifi Amadiume show us that, without thinking of this sphere as biologically determined, one still has to think in terms of a sphere determined by definitions of secondary and primary sexual characteristics in such a way that the inhabitants of the other sphere are para-subjective, not fully subject.[11] The dominant groups' way of handling the three-part ontology of language has to be learnt as well—if the subordinate ways of rusing with rhetoric are to be disclosed.

To decide whether you are prepared enough to start translating, then, it might help if you have graduated into speaking, by choice or preference, of intimate matters in the language of the original. I have worked my way back to my earlier point: I cannot see why the publishers' convenience or classroom convenience or time convenience for people who do not have the time to learn should organize the construction of the rest of the world for western feminism. Five years ago, berated as unsisterly, I would think, "Well, you know one ought to be a bit more giving etc.", but then I asked myself again, "What am I giving, or giving up? To whom am I giving by assuring that you don't have to work that hard, just come and get it? What am I trying to promote?" People would say, you who have succeeded should not pretend to be a marginal. But surely by demanding higher standards of translation, I am not marginalizing myself or the language of the original?

I have learnt through translating Devi how this three-part structure works differently from English in my native language. And here another historical irony has become personally apparent to me. In the old days, it was most important for a colonial or post-colonial student of English to be as "indistinguishable" as possible from the native speaker of English. I think it is necessary for people in the Third World translation trade now to accept that the wheel has come around, that the genuinely bilingual post-colonial now has a bit of an advantage. But she does not have a real advantage as a translator if she is not strictly bilingual, if she merely speaks her native language. Her own native space is, after all, also class organized. And that organization still often carries the traces of access to imperialism, often relates inversely to access to the vernacular as a public language. So here the requirement for intimacy brings a recognition of the public sphere as well. If we were thinking of translating Marianne Moore or Emily Dickinson, the standard for the translator could not be "anyone who can conduct a conversation in the language of the original (in this case English)". When applied to a Third World language, the position is inherently ethnocentric. And then to present these translations to our unprepared students so that they can learn about women writing!

In my view, the translator from a Third World language should be sufficiently in touch with what is going on in literary production in that language to be capable of distinguishing between good and bad writing by women, resistant and conformist writing by women.

She must be able to confront the idea that what seems resistant in the space of English may be reactionary in the space of the original language. Farida Akhter has argued that, in Bangladesh, the real work of the women's movement and of feminism is being undermined by talk of "gendering", mostly deployed by the women's development wings of transnational non-government organizations, in conjunction with some local academic feminist theorists.[12] One of her intuitions was that "gendering" could not be translated into Bengali. "Gendering" is an awkward new word in English as well. Akhter is profoundly involved in international feminism. And her base is Third World. I could not translate "gender" into the US feminist context for her. This misfiring of translation, between a superlative reader of the social text such as Akhter, and a careful translator like myself, speaking as friends, has added to my sense of the task of the translator.

Good and bad is a flexible standard, like all standards. Here another lesson of post-structuralism helps: these decisions of standards are made anyway. It is the attempt to justify them adequately that polices. That is why disciplinary preparation in school requires that you write examinations to prove these standards. Publishing houses routinely engage in materialist confusion of those standards. The translator must be able to fight that metropolitan materialism with a special kind of specialist's knowledge, not mere philosophical convictions.

In other words, the person who is translating must have a tough sense of the specific terrain of the original, so that she can fight the racist assumption that all Third World women's writing is good. I am often approached by women who would like to put Devi in with just Indian women writers. I am troubled by this, because "Indian women" is not a feminist category. (Elsewhere I have argued that "epistemes"—ways of constructing objects of knowledge—should not have national names either.)[13] Sometimes Indian women writing means American women writing or British women writing, except for national *origin*. There is an ethno-cultural agenda, an obliteration of Third World specificity as well as a denial of cultural citizenship, in calling them merely "Indian".

My initial point was that the task of the translator is to surrender herself to the linguistic rhetoricity of the original text. Although this point has larger political implications, we can say that the not unimportant minimal consequence of ignoring this task is the loss of "the literariry and textuality and sensuality of the writing" (Michèle's words). I have worked my way to a second point, that the translator must be able to discriminate on the terrain of the original. Let us dwell on it a bit longer.

I choose Devi because she is unlike her scene. I have heard an English Shakespearean suggest that every bit of Shakespeare criticism coming from the subcontinent was by that virtue resistant. By such a judgement, we are also denied the right to be critical. It was of course bad to have put the place under subjugation, to have tried to make the place over with calculated restrictions. But that does not mean that everything that is coming out of that place after a negotiated independence nearly fifty years ago is necessarily right. The old anthropological supposition (and that is bad anthropology) that every person from a culture is nothing but a whole example of that culture is acted out in my colleague's suggestion. I remain interested in writers who are against the current, against the mainstream. I remain convinced that the interesting literary text might be precisely the text where you do not learn what the majority view of majority cultural representation or self-representation of a nation state might be. The translator has to make herself, in the case of Third World women writing, almost better equipped than the translator who is dealing with the western European languages, because of the fact that there is so much of the old colonial attitude, slightly displaced, at work in the translation racket. Post-structuralism *can* radicalize the field of preparation so that simply boning up on the language is not enough; there is also that special relationship to the staging of language as the production of agency that one must attend to. But the agenda of poststructuralism is mostly elsewhere, and the resistance to theory among metropolitan feminists would lead us into yet another narrative.

The understanding of the task of the translator and the practice of the craft are related but different. Let me summarize how I work. At first, I translate at speed. If I stop to think about what is happening to the English, if I assume an audience, if I take the intending subject as more than a springboard, I cannot jump in, I cannot surrender. My relationship with Devi is easygoing. I am able to say to her: I surrender to you in your writing, not you as intending subject. There, in friendship, is another kind of surrender. Surrendering to the text in this way means, most of the time, being literal. When I have produced a version this way, I revise. I revise not in terms of a possible audience, but by the protocols of the thing in front of me, in a sort of English. And I keep hoping that the student in the classroom will not be able to think that the text is just a purveyor of social realism if it is translated with an eye toward the dynamic staging of language mimed in the revision by the rules of the in-between discourse produced by a literalist surrender.

Vain hope, perhaps, for the accountability is different. When I translated Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie,* I was reviewed in a major journal for the first and last time. In the case of my translations of Devi, I have almost no fear of being accurately judged by my readership here. It makes the task more dangerous and more risky. And that for me is the real difference between translating Derrida and translating Mahasweta Devi, not merely the rather more artificial difference between deconstructive philosophy and political fiction.

The opposite argument is not neatly true. There is a large number of people in the Third World who read the old imperial languages. People reading current feminist fiction in the European languages would probably read it in the appropriate imperial language. And the same goes for European philosophy. The act of translating into the Third World language is often a political exercise of a different sort. I am looking forward, as of this writing, to lecturing in Bengali on deconstruction in front of a highly sophisticated audience, knowledgeable both in Bengali and in deconstruction (which they read in English and French and sometimes write about in Bengali), at Jadavpur University in Calcutta. It will be a kind of testing of the post-colonial translator, I think.

Democracy changes into the law of force in the case of translation from the Third World and women even more because of their peculiar relationship to whatever you call the public/private divide. A neatly reversible argument would be possible if the particular Third World country had cornered the Industrial Revolution first and embarked on monopoly imperialist territorial capitalism as one of its consequences, and thus been able to impose a language as international norm. Something like that idiotic joke: if the Second World War had gone differently, the United States would be speaking Japanese. Such egalitarian reversible judgements are appropriate to counter-factual fantasy. Translation remains dependent upon the language skill of the majority. A prominent Belgian translation theorist solves the problem by suggesting that, rather than talk about the Third World, where a lot of passion is involved, one should speak about the European Renaissance, since a great deal of wholesale cross-cultural translation from Graeco-Roman antiquity was undertaken then. What one overlooks is the sheer authority ascribed to the originals in that historical phenomenon. The status of a language in the world is what one must consider when teasing out the politics of translation. Translatese in

Bengali can be derided and criticized by large groups of anglophone and anglograph Bengalis. It is only in the hegemonic languages that the benevolent do not take the limits of their own often uninstructed good will into account. That phenomenon becomes hardest to fight because the individuals involved in it are genuinely benevolent and you are identified as a trouble-maker. This becomes particularly difficult when the metropolitan feminist, who is sometimes the assimilated post-colonial, invokes, indeed translates, a too quickly shared feminist notion of accessibility.

If you want to make the translated text accessible, try doing it for the person who wrote it. The problem comes clear then, for she is not within the same history of style. What is it that you are making accessible? The accessible level is the level of abstraction where the individual is already formed, where one can speak individual rights. When you hang out and with a language away from your own *(Mitwegsein)* so that you want to use that language by preference, sometimes, when you discuss something complicated, then you are on the way to making a dimension of the text accessible to the reader, with a light and easy touch, to which she does not accede in her everyday. If you are making anything else accessible, through a language quickly learnt with an idea that you transfer content, then you are betraying the text and showing rather dubious politics.

How will women's solidarity be measured here? How will their common experience be reckoned if one cannot imagine the traffic in accessibility going both ways? I think that idea should be given a decent burial as ground of knowledge, together with the idea of humanist universality. It is good to think that women have something in common, when one is approaching women with whom a relationship would not otherwise be possible. It is a great first step. But, if your interest is in learning if there *is* women's solidarity, how about leaving this assumption, appropriate as a means to an end like local or global social work, and trying a second step? Rather than imagining that women automatically have something identifiable in common, why not say, humbly and practically, my first obligation in understanding solidarity is to learn her mother-tongue. You will see immediately what the differences are. You will also feel the solidarity every day as you make the attempt to learn the language in which the other woman learnt to recognize reality at her mother's knee. This is preparation for the intimacy of cultural translation. If you are going to bludgeon someone else by insisting on your version of solidarity, you have the obligation to try out this experiment and see how far your solidarity goes.

In other words, if you are interested in talking about the other, and/or in making a claim to be the other, it is crucial to learn other languages. This should be distinguished from the learned tradition of language acquisition for academic work. I am talking about the importance of language acquisition for the woman from a hegemonic monolinguist culture who makes everybody's life miserable by insisting on women's solidarity at her price. I am uncomfortable with-notions of feminist solidarity which are celebrated when everybody involved is similarly produced. There are countless languages in which women all over the world have grown up and been female or feminist, and yet the languages we keep on learning by rote are the powerful European ones, sometimes the powerful Asian ones, least often the chief African ones. The "other" languages are learnt only by

anthropologists who *must* produce knowledge across an epistemic divide. They are generally (though not invariably) not interested in the three-part structure we are discussing.

If we are discussing solidarity as a theoretical position, we must also remember that not all the world's women are literate. There are traditions and situations that remain obscure because we cannot share their linguistic constitution. It is from this angle that I have felt that learning languages might sharpen our own presuppositions about what it means to use the sign "woman". If we say that things should be accessible to us, who is this "us"? What does that sign mean?

Although I have used the examples of women all along, the arguments apply across the board. It is just that women's rhetoricity may be doubly obscured. I do not see the advantage of being completely focused on a single issue, although one must establish practical priorities. In this book, we are concerned with poststructuralism and its effect on feminist theory. Where some post-structuralist thinking can be applied to the constitution of the agent in terms of the literary operations of language, women's texts might be operating differently because of the social differentiation between the sexes. Of course the point applies generally to the colonial context as well. When Ngugi decided to write in Kikuyu, some thought he was bringing a private language into the public sphere. But what makes a language shared by many people in a community private? I was thinking about those so-called private languages when I was talking about language learning. But even within those private languages it is my conviction that there is a difference in the way in which the staging of language produces not only the sexed subject but the gendered agent, by a version of centring, persistently disrupted by rhetoricity, indicating contingency. Unless demonstrated otherwise, this for me remains the condition and effect of dominant and subordinate gendering. If that is so, then we have some reason to focus on women's texts. Let us use the word "woman" to name that space of para-subjects defined as such by the social inscription of primary and secondary sexual characteristics. Then we can cautiously begin to track a sort of commonality in being set apart, within the different rhetorical strategies of different languages. But even here, historical superiorities of class must be kept in mind. Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai and Gayatri Spivak do not have the same rhetorical figuration of agency as an illiterate domestic servant.

Tracking commonality through responsible translation can lead us into areas of difference and different differentiations. This may also be important because, in the heritage of imperialism, the female legal subject bears the mark of a failure of Europeanization, by contrast with the female anthropological or literary subject from the area. For example, the division between the French and Islamic codes in modern Algeria is in terms of family, marriage, inheritance, legitimacy and female social agency. These are differences that we must keep in mind. And we must honour the difference between ethnic minorities in the First World and majority populations of the Third.

In conversation, Barrett had asked me if I now inclined more toward Foucault. This is indeed the case. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?", I took a rather strong critical line on Foucault's work, as part of a general critique of imperialism.[14] I do, however, find, his concept of *pouvoir-savoir* immensely useful. Foucault has

contributed to French this or dinar y-language doublet (the ability to know [as]) to take its place quietly beside *vouloir-dire* (the wish to say—meaning to mean).

On the most mundane level, *pouvoir-savoir* is the shared skill which allows us to make (common) sense of things. It is certainly not only power/knowledge in the sense of *puissance/connaissance*. Those are aggregative institutions. The common way in which one makes sense of things, on the other hand, loses itself in the sub-individual.

Looking at *pouvoir-savoir* in terms of women, one of my focuses has been new immigrants and the change of mother-tongue and *pouvoir-savoir* between mother and daughter. When the daughter talks reproductive rights and the mother talks protecting honour, is this the birth or death of translation?

Foucault is also interesting in his new notion of the ethics of the care for the self. In order to be able to get to the subject of ethics it may be necessary to look at the ways in which an individual in that culture is instructed to care for the self rather than the imperialism-specific secularist notion that the ethical subject is given as human. In a secularism which is structurally identical with Christianity laundered in the bleach of moral philosophy, the subject of ethics is faceless. Breaking out, Foucault was investigating other ways of making sense of how the subject becomes ethical. This is of interest because, given the connection between imperialism and secularism, there is almost no way of getting to alternative general voices except through religion. And if one does not look at religion as mechanisms of producing the ethical subject, one gets various kinds of "fundamentalism". Workers in cultural politics and its connections to a new ethical philosophy have to be interested in religion in the production of ethical subjects. There is much room for feminist work here because western feminists have not so far been aware of religion as a cultural instrument rather than a mark of cultural difference. I am currently working on Hindu performative ethics with Professor B.K.Matilal. He is an enlightened male feminist. I am an active feminist. Helped by his learning and his openness I am learning to distinguish between ethical catalysts and ethical motors even as I learn to translate bits of the Sanskrit epic in a way different from all the accepted translations, because I rely not only on learning, not only on "good English", but on that three-part scheme of which I have so lengthily spoken. I hope the results will please readers. If we are going to look at an ethics that emerges from something other than the historically secularist ideal—at an ethics of sexual differences, at an ethics that can confront the emergence of fundamentalisms without apology or dismissal in the name of the Enlightenment—then *pouvoir-savoir* and the care for the self in Foucault can be illuminating. And these "other ways" bring us back to translation, in the general sense.

Translation in general

I want now to add two sections to what was generated from the initial conversation with Barrett. I will dwell on the politics of translation in a general sense, by way of three examples of "cultural translation" in English. I want to make the point that the lessons of translation in the narrow sense can reach much further.

First, J.M.Coetzee's *Foe*.[15] This book represents the impropriety of the dominant's desire to give voice to the native. When Susan Barton, the eighteenth-century Englishwoman from *Roxana*, attempts to teach a muted Friday (from *Robinson Crusoe*) to read and write English, he draws an incomprehensible rebus on his slate and wipes it out, withholds it. You cannot translate from a position of monolinguist superiority. Coetzee as white creole translates *Robinson Crusoe* by representing Friday as the agent of a withholding.

Second, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.[16] Let us look at the scene of the change of the mother-tongue from mother to daughter. Strictly speaking, it is not a change, but a loss, for the narrative is not of immigration but of slavery. Sethe, the central character of the novel, remembers: "What Nan"—her mother's fellow-slave and friend—"told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message—that was—that was and had been there all along" (p. 62). The representation of this message, as it passes through the forgetfulness of death to Sethe's ghostly daughter Beloved, is of a withholding: "This is not a story to pass on" (p. 275).

Between mother and daughter, a certain historical withholding intervenes. If the situation between the new immigrant mother and daughter provokes the question as to whether it is the birth or death of translation (see. above, p. 409), here the author represents with violence a certain birth-in-death, a death-in-birth of a story that is not to translate or pass on, strictly speaking, therefore, an aporia, and yet it is passed on, with the mark of *un*translatability on it, in the bound book, *Beloved*, that we hold in our hands. Contrast this to the confidence in accessibility in the house of power, where history is waiting to be restored.

The scene of violence between mother and daughter (reported and passed on by the daughter Sethe to her daughter Denver, who carries the name of a white trash girl, in partial acknowledgement of women's solidarity in birthing) is, then, the condition of (im)possibility of *Beloved*:[17]

> She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, "This is your ma'am. This," and she pointed... "Yes, Ma'am," I said... "But how will you know me?... Mark me, too," I said ... "Did she?" asked Denver. "She slapped my face." "What for?" "I didn't understand it then. Not till I had a mark of my own."
>
> (p. 61)

This scene, of claiming the brand of the owner as "my own", to create, in this broken chain of marks owned by separate white male agents of property, an unbroken chain of re-memory in (enslaved) daughters as agents of a history not to be passed on, is of necessity more poignant than Friday's scene of withheld writing from the white woman wanting to create history by giving her "own" language. And the lesson is the (im)possibility of translation in the general sense. Rhetoric points at absolute contingency, not the sequentiality of time, not even the cycle of seasons, but only "weather". "By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is

not only the footprints but the water and what it is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for"—after the effacement of the trace, no project for restoring (women's?) history—"but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather" (p. 275).

With this invocation of contingency, where nature may be "the great body without organs of woman", we can align ourselves with Wilson Harris, the author of *The Guyana Quartet,* for whom trees are "the lungs of the globe".[18] Harris hails the (re)birth of the native imagination as not merely the trans-lation but the transsubstantiation of the species. What in more workaday language I have called the obligation of the translator to be able to juggle the rhetorical silences in the two languages, Harris puts this way, pointing at the need for translating the Carib's English:

> The Caribbean bone flute, made of human bone, is a seed in the soul of the Caribbean. It is a primitive technology that we can turn around [trans-version?]. Consuming our biases and prejudices in ourselves we can let the bone flute help us open ourselves rather than read it the other way—as a metonymic devouring of a bit of flesh.[19] The link of music with cannibalism is a sublime paradox. When the music of the bone flute opens the doors, absences flow in, and the native imagination puts together the ingredients for quantum immediacy out of unpredictable resources.

The bone flute has been neglected by Caribbean writers, says Wilson Harris, because progressive realism is a charismatic way of writing prize-winning fiction. Progressive realism measures the bone. Progressive realism is the too-easy accessibility of translation as transfer of substance.

The progressive realism of the west dismissed the native imagination as the place of the fetish. Hegel was perhaps the greatest systematizer of this dismissal. And psychoanalytic cultural criticism in its present charismatic incarnation sometimes measures the bone with uncanny precision. It is perhaps not fortuitous that the passage below gives us an account of Hegel that is the exact opposite of Harris's vision. The paradox of the sublime and the bone here lead to non-language seen as inertia, where the structure of passage is mere logic. The authority of the supreme language makes translation impossible:

> The Sublime is therefore the paradox of an object which, in the very field of representation, provides a view, in a negative way, of the dimension of what is unpresentable... The bone, the skull, is thus an object which, by means of its *presence,* fills out the void, the impossibility of the signifying *representation* of the subject... The proposition "Wealth is the Self" repeats at this level the proposition "The Spirit is a bone" [both propositions are Hegel's]: in both cases we are dealing with a proposition which is at first sight absurd, nonsensical, with an equation the terms of which are incompatible; in both cases we encounter the same logical structure of passage: the subject, totally lost in the medium of language (language of gesture

> and grimaces; language of flattery), finds its objective counterpart in
> the inertia of a non-language object (skull, money).[20]

Wilson Harris's vision is abstract, translating Morrison's "weather" into an oceanic
version of quantum physics. But all three cultural translators cited in this section
ask us to attend to the rhetoric which points to the limits of translation, in the
creole's, the slave-daughter's, the Carib's use of "English". Let us learn the lesson of
translation from these brilliant inside/outsiders and translate it into the situation of
other languages.

Reading as translation

In conclusion, I want to show how the post-colonial as the outside/insider translates
white theory as she reads, so that she can discriminate on the terrain of the original.
She wants to use what is useful. Again, I hope this can pass on a lesson to the
translator in the narrow sense.

"The link of music with cannibalism is a sublime paradox." I believe Wilson
Harris is using "sublime" here with some degree of precision, indicating the undoing
of the progressive western subject as realist interpreter of history. Can a theoretical
account of the aesthetic sublime in English discourse, ostensibly far from the bone
flute, be of use? By way of answer, I will use my reading of Peter de Bolla's superb
scholarly account of *The Discourse of the Sublime* as an example of sympathetic
reading as translation, precisely not a surrender but a friendly learning by taking a
distance.[21]

P. 4: "What was it to be a subject in the eighteenth century?" The reader-
astranslator (RAT) is excited. The long eighteenth century in Britain is the account
of the constitution and transformation of nation into empire. Shall we read that
story? The book will least touch on that issue, if only to swerve. And women will
not be seen as touched in their agency formation by that change. The book's strong
feminist sympathies relate to the Englishwoman only as gender victim. But the
erudition of the text allows us to think that this sort of rhetorical reading might be
the method to open up the question "What is it to be a post-colonial reader of
English in the twentieth century?" The representative reader of *The Discourse of
the Sublime* will be post-colonial. Has that law of the majority been observed, or
the law of the strong?

On p. 72 RAT comes to a discussion of Burke on the sublime:

> The internal resistance of Burke's text...restricts the full play of this
> trope [power...as a trope articulating the technologies of the sublime],
> thereby defeating a description of the sublime experience uniquely in
> terms of the enpowered [sic] subject. Put briefly, Burke, for a number of
> reasons, among which we must include political aims and ends, stops
> short of a discourse on the sublime, and in so doing he reinstates the
> ultimate power of an adjacent discourse, theology, which locates its
> own self-authenticating power grimly within the boundaries of godhead.

Was it also because Burke was deeply implicated in searching out the recesses of the mental theatre of the English master in the colonies that he had some notion of different kinds of subject and therefore, like some Kurtz before Conrad, recoiled in horror before the sublimely empowered subject? Was it because, like some Kristeva before *Chinese Women,* Burke had tried to imagine the Begums of Oudh as legal subjects that he had put self-authentication elsewhere?[22] *The Discourse of the Sublime,* in noticing Burke's difference from the other discoursers on the sublime, opens doors for other RATs to engage in such scholarly speculations and thus exceed and expand the book.

Pp. 106, 111–12, 131: RAT comes to the English National Debt. British colonialism was a violent deconstruction of the hyphen between nation and state.[23] In imperialism the nation was subl(im)ated into empire. Of this, no clue in *The Discourse.* The Bank of England is discussed. Its founding in 1696, and the transformation of letters of credit to the ancestor of the modern cheque, had something like a relationship with the fortunes of the East India Company and the founding of Calcutta in 1690. The *national* debt is in fact the site of a crisismanagement, where the nation, sublime object as miraculating subject of ideology, changes the sign "debtor" into a catachresis or false metaphor by way of "an acceptance of a permanent discrepancy between the total circulating specie and the debt". The French War, certainly the immediate efficient cause, is soon woven into the vaster textile of crisis. *The Discourse* cannot see the nation covering for the colonial economy. As on the occasion of the race-specificity of gendering, so on the discourse of multinational capital, the argument is kept domestic, within England, European.[24] RAT snuffles off, disgruntled. She finds a kind of comfort in Mahasweta's livid figuration of the woman's body as body rather than attend to this history of the English body "as a disfigurative device in order to return to [it] its lost literality". Reading as translation has misfired here.

On p. 140 RAT comes to the elder Pitt. Although his functionality is initially seen as "demanded…by the incorporation of nation", it is not possible not at least to mention empire when speaking of Pitt's voice:

> the voice of Pitt…works its doubled intervention into the spirit and character of the times; at once the supreme example of the private individual in the service of the state, and the private individual eradicated by the needs of a public, nationalist, commercial empire. In this sense the voice of Pitt becomes the most extreme example of the textualization of the body for the rest of the century.
>
> (p. 182)

We have seen a literal case of the textualization of the surface of the body between slave mother and slave daughter in *Beloved,* where mother hits daughter to stop her thinking that the signs of that text can be passed on, a lesson learnt *après-coup,* literally after the blow of the daughter's own branding. Should RAT expect an account of the passing on of the textualization of the interior of the body through the voice, a metonym for consciousness, from master father to master son? The

younger Pitt took the first step to change the nationalist empire to the imperial nation with the India Act of 1784. Can *The Discourse of the Sublime* plot that sublime relay? Not yet. But here, too, an exceeding and expanding translation is possible.

Predictably, RAT finds a foothold in the rhetoricity of *The Discourse*. Chapter 10 begins: "The second part of this study has steadily examined how 'theory' sets out to legislate and control a practice, how it produces the excess which it cannot legislate, and removes from the centre to the boundary its limit, limiting case" (p. 230). This passage reads to a deconstructive RAT as an enabling self-description of the text, although within the limits of the book, it describes, not itself but the object of its investigation. By the time the end of the book is reached, RAT feels that she has been written into the text:

> As a history of that refusal and resistance [this book] presents a record of its own coming into being as history, the history of the thought it wants to think differently, over there. It is therefore, only appropriate that its conclusion should gesture towards the limit, risk the reinversion of the boundary by speaking from the other, refusing silence to what is unsaid.

Beyond this "clamour for a kiss" of the other space, it is "just weather".

Under the figure of RAT (reader-as-translator), I have tried to limn the politics of a certain kind of clandestine post-colonial reading, using the master marks to put together a history. Thus we find out what books we can forage, and what we must set aside. I can use Peter de Bella's *The Discourse on the Sublime* to open up dull histories of the colonial eighteenth century. Was Toni Morrison, a writer well-versed in contemporary literary theory, obliged to set aside Paul de Man's "The Purloined Ribbon"?[25]

> Eighteen seventy-four and white folks were still on the loose... Human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing... But none of that had worn out his marrow... It was the ribbon... He thought it was a cardinal feather stuck to his boat. He tugged and what came loose in his hand was a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp... He kept the ribbon; the skin smell nagged him.
>
> (pp. 180–1)

Morrison next invokes a language whose selvedge is so frayed that no *frayage* can facilitate full passage: "This time, although he couldn't cipher but one word, he believed he knew who spoke them. The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons" (p. 181). Did the explanation of promises and excuses in eighteenth-century Geneva not make it across into this "roar"? I will not check it out and measure the bone flute. I will simply dedicate these pages to the author of *Beloved,* in the name of translation.

Notes

1 The first part of this essay is based on a conversation with Michèle Barrett in the summer of 1990.
2 Forthcoming from Seagull Press, Calcutta.
3 "Facilitation" is the English translation of a Freudian term which is translated *frayage* in French. The dictionary meaning is:

> Term used by Freud at a time when he was putting forward a neurological model of the functioning of the psychical apparatus (1895): the excitation, in passing from one neurone to another, runs into a certain resistance; where its passage results in a permanent reduction in this resistance, there is said to be facilitation; excitation will opt for a facilitated pathway in preference to one where no facilitation has occurred.
>   (J.Laplanche and J.-B.Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* [Hogarth Press, London, 1973], p. 157)

4 Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'", tr. Mary Quaintance, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice: Cardozo Law Review,* XI (July–Aug. 1990); p. 923.
5 "The Wet-nurse", in Kali for Women (eds), *Truth Tales: Stories by Indian Women* (The Women's Press, London, 1987), pp. 1–50 (first published by Kali for Women, Delhi, 1986), and "Breast-giver", in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (Methuen/Routledge, New York, 1987), pp. 222–40.
6 Luce Irigaray argues persuasively that, Emmanuel Levinas to the contrary, within the ethics of sexual difference the erotic is ethical ("The Fecundity of the Caress", in her *Ethics of Sexual Difference,* tr. Carolyn Burke and G.C.Gill (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y. [1993]).
7 Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood* and Society in India, 2nd edn (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1981), pp. 171ff. Part of this discussion in a slightly different form is included in my "Psychoanalysis in Left Field; and Fieldworking: Examples to fit the Title", in Michael Munchow and Sonu Shamdasani (eds), *Psychoanalyis, Philosophy and Culture* (Routledge, London, 1994), pp. 41–75.
8 See Partha Chatterjee, "Nationalism and the Woman Question", in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Re-Casting Women (*Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1990), pp. 233–53, for a detailed discussion of this gendering of Indian nationalism.
9 Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism,* tr. Hans H.Gerth and Don Martindale (Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1958).
10 More on this in a more personal context in Spivak, "Stagings of the Origin", in *Third Text*.
11 Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters Female Husbands* (Zed Books, London, 1987).
12 For background on Akhter, already somewhat dated for this interventionist in

the history of the present, see Yayori Matsui (ed.), *Women's Asia* (Zed Books, London, 1989), ch. 1.

13 "More on Power/Knowledge", in Thomas E.Wartenberg (ed.), *Re-Thinking Power* (State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 1992).

14 Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 111., 1988), pp. 271–313.

15 For an extended consideration of these and related points, see my "Versions of the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* reading Defoe's *Crusoe/Roxana*", in Jonathan Arac (ed.), *Theory and Its Consequences* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1990).

16 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Plume Books, New York, 1987). Page numbers are included in my text.

17 For (im)possibility, see my "Literary Representation of the Subaltern", in my *In Other Worlds,* pp. 241–68.

18 Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts", in Rodney Livingstone and George Benton tr., *Early Writings* (Vintage, New York, 1975), pp. 279–400; Wilson Harris, *The Guyana Quartet* (Faber, London, 1985). These quotations are from Wilson Harris, "Cross-cultural Crisis: Imagery, Language, and the Intuitive Imagination", Commonwealth Lectures, 1990, Lecture no. 2, 31 Oct. 1990, University of Cambridge.

19 Derrida traces the trajectory of the Hegelian and pre-Hegelian discourse of the fetish (Jacques Derrida, *Glas,* tr. Richard Rand and John P.Leavey, Jr. [University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebr., 1986]). The worshipper of the fetish eats human flesh. The worshipper of God feasts on the Eucharist. Harris transverses the fetish here through the native imagination.

20 Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology,* tr. Jon Barnes (Verso, London, 1989), pp. 203, 208, 212.

21 Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1989). Page numbers are given in my text.

22 References and discussion of "The Begums of Oudh", and "The Impeachment of Warren Hastings" are to be found in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* ed. P.J.Marshall (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981), vol. 5: *India: Madras and Bengal,* pp. 410–12, pp. 465–6, p. 470; and in vol. 6: *India: Launching of The Hastings Impeachment* respectively.

23 See my "Reading the Archives: the Rani of Sirmur", in Francis Barker (ed.), *Europe and Its Others* (University of Essex, Colchester, 1985), pp. 128–51.

24 Ibid.

25 Paul de Man, "The Purloined Ribbon", reprinted as "Excuses *(Confessions)*" in de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1979), pp. 278–301.

Kwame Anthony Appiah

THICK TRANSLATION

Asém a éhia Akanfoö no na Ntafoö de goro brékété.
[A matter which troubles the Akan people, the people of Gonja take to play the brékété drum.[1]]

Kaka ne éka ne ayafunka fanyinam éka.
[Toothache and indebtedness and stomach ache, debt is preferable.[2]]

Kamesékwakye se: se önim se abé rebébere a, anka wanköware adöbé nkonto.
[The drongo says: if he had known that the palm nuts were going to ripen, then he would not have married the raffia palm with a twisted leg.]

I

THESE PROVERBS ARE in (one dialect of) the Twi-language—now, for reasons too intricate to discuss quickly here, often called "Akan"—which is the major language spoken in and around my hometown of Kumasi in Ghana. They are but three of the 7000—odd proverbs that my mother has collected over roughly the period of my lifetime, and she and some friends have been trying to understand them for the last decade or so; latterly I have joined them in setting out to prepare a manuscript that (as we say) reduces many of these sayings for the first time to writing, that glosses them in English, and that offers also, in each case, what I have offered you: what we call a literal translation.

Coincidentally (or, perhaps, not so coincidentally) I have spent much of the same decade working in what analytic philosophers call the theory of meaning

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or philosophical semantics: in the activity of trying to say what an adequate theoretical account of the meanings of words and phrases and sentences should look like.

It would seem natural enough, *prima facie,* to bring these two activities—of translating and theorizing about meaning—together, because of the simplest of beginning thoughts about translation: namely that it is an attempt to find ways of saying in one language something that means the same as what has been said in another. What I would like to do in this essay is to explore some of the reasons why it is that this *prima facie* thought should be resisted: I shall argue that most of what interests us in the translations that interest us most is not meaning, in the sense that philosophy of language uses the term: in many cases, as the proverbs surely show and for reasons they exemplify, getting the meaning, in this sense, right is hardly even a first step towards understanding.

II

Let me start again with a simple thought: what we translate are utterances, things made with words by men and women, with voice or pen or keyboard; and those utterances are the products of actions, which like all actions are undertaken for reasons. Since reasons can be complex and extensive, grasping an agent's reasons can be a difficult business; and we can easily feel that we have not dug deeply enough, when we have told the best story we can. Utterances—ordinary everyday remarks—are in this respect somewhat unusual for while it may not be easy to give a *full* account of why someone has, for example, uttered the words "It's a lovely, sunny day," in the ordinary course of things English speakers will be inclined to suppose that anyone who says this to them has, as one reason for uttering, the intention to express the thought that it is a lovely, sunny day.

I say "in the ordinary course of things" because, in odd enough circumstances, we might suppose no such thing; and that is because in odd enough circumstances it might not be true. Perhaps—to impose on you one of those bizarre fantasies that mark the style of the philosopher—this is a speaker who has been told this is an English sentence without being told what it means; perhaps, she is uttering it not to express that thought—which she does not know it expresses—but to mislead us into thinking she is anglophone. Perhaps we know all this. Perhaps. Still assertoric utterances do ordinarily propose themselves as motivated, at least in part, by a desire to express a certain specific thought.

This is easy enough, of course, to explain: part of what is distinctive about utterance as a kind of action, with distinctive sorts of reasons, is that it is *conventional;* and the thought we normally take someone to be intending to express in uttering a sentence is the thought[3] that the conventions of language associate with it.

Grice famously suggested that we could say what an (assertoric) utterance meant by identifying the (content of) the belief[4] that it was conventionally intended to produce; and he identified, correctly in my view, the heart of the mechanism by which these beliefs are supposed to be produced. Roughly, he suggested that when

a speaker communicates a belief by way of the utterance of a sentence, she does so by getting her hearers to recognize *both* that this is the belief she intends them to have *and* that she intends them to have that belief in part *because* they recognize that primary intention. This is the heart of utterance—meaning; the conventions of language associate words with roles in determining *which* belief is to be communicated by an utterance, but it is by way of the Gricean mechanism that this communication occurs, when it does.

This Gricean mechanism—the act that achieves its purpose because its purpose is recognized—is central to meaning just because it occurs both in the cases where meaning is conventional and in those cases where it is not. If I say that "John is in the kitchen or the den," in ordinary circumstances. I get you to believe, by way of the Gricean mechanism, something I have not literally *said*—namely that I don't know which.

To explain why you believe this, we should begin with the fact that in ordinary contexts our exchanges are governed by what Grice called conversational maxims: by understandings to the effect that we are trying to be helpful, trying to be, for example, both maximally and relevantly informative.

Since I know you know this, I can assume you will infer that I do not know more precisely where John is. In uttering the sentence I will have your recognizing this as one of its intended effects. But you know I know you know this, and so you can infer that I intended that you should believe that I was being helpful and, thus, infer that I intended you to believe that I did not know more precisely where John was. That this is a case of the Gricean mechanism follows from that fact that, because I know you know I know you know this, I expect you to recognize that I had this intention and to come to believe that I did not know more precisely where John was in part because you recognized the intention. It is no surprise that Grice, who discovered this mechanism, also discovered such so-called conversational implicatures: these thoughts we communicate by encouraging others to draw inferences that go beyond the meaning of the words we utter. (It will be useful later to have a name for the case where you and I both know P, each knows the other knows it, and also knows the other knows that each knows the other knows it, and so on… I shall use a standard shorthand for this and say that in this case we "mutually know" that P.)

Characteristically for a philosopher, I have focussed on language that is assertoric; but similar lines of thought can be applied to optatives which express preferences—wishes or wants—rather than beliefs. They differ from simple assertions in expressing different sorts of states of the speaker. To deal with questions and orders, we must give a different account of the intended response from the hearer, since questions and commands are aimed at something more active than mere belief.[5]

For performatives, more yet is required: for I can pronounce you man and wife only when there exists a social practice of marrying, in which my utterances are conventionally given a certain role.

Despite these differences, the general theoretical point here applies across the board: it is possible to have the reasons we ordinarily have for uttering only because there exists within any community of speakers of a single language a specific structure of mutual expectations about reasons for uttering. Learning the

grammar and the lexicon of a language is learning a complex set of instructions for generating acts that are standardly intended to achieve their effects in others who know the same instructions…and precisely by way of a recognition of those intentions.

When somebody speaks, therefore, in the ordinary course of things and in the absence of contrary evidence, she will be taken and will expect to be taken by participants in the conventions of her language to have the intentions that those conventions associate, by way of grammar and lexicon, with her utterance.[6] To be able to identify *those* intentions is to know the literal meaning of what she has said; and the literal meanings of words and phrases are determined by the way in which they contribute to fixing the intentions associated with the speech-acts in which they can occur. Let me call these the *literal* intentions. While each utterance of a sentence will be surrounded and motivated by more than its literal intentions, will have (in other words) more reasons than these, and while *some* utterances will not even have these intentions—because, for example, they are clearly ironically intended—it remains true that explanations of what a speaker is doing in uttering a sentence will almost always involve reference to the standard intentions, even in the cases where they are absent.

III

If, as I originally suggested, translation is an attempt to find ways of saying in one language something that means the same as what has been said in another; and if, as I have recently suggested, the literal meaning of an utterance is a matter of what intentions a speaker would ordinarily be taken to have in uttering it; then a literal translation ought to be a sentence of, for example, English, that would ordinarily be taken to be uttered with the intention that the original, for example, Twi, sentence, was conventionally associated with.[7]

This thought has been rejected more often than it has been affirmed in recent philosophy of language because, for a variety of reasons, it has been thought that the literal intention that goes with some or perhaps all sentences is one that you can have only if you speak the language to which those sentences belong. If you do not recognize the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis when dressed up this way, it is because the hypothesis is normally expressed as the view that what language you speak affects what thoughts you can have: but then, if that were true, it would affect what thoughts you could intend to express also. If what language you speak determines what thoughts or intentions you can have, translation, thus conceived, will always be impossible.

Perhaps because I was brought up between several languages, not all of them varieties of English, I have never quite believed that this could be right. Of course there are some thoughts that it is hard to imagine someone having without *some* language—the thought that a particle is a neutral boson, for example—and others that require linguistic knowledge constitutively: the thought that Ronald Reagan is smarter than my dog surely requires that I know—which means know how to use in sentences—Ronald Reagan's name. But surely there are thoughts—"It's a cat," say—that you can have without speaking

English; have, uncontroversially, no questions begged. And if that is so, can we not see how you could have the thought that this is a neutral boson, not because you know the words "neutral boson" but because you know some other words that refer, in some other language, to the same thing? So, at least, I think, though I shall not argue it here; because what I want to notice now is that even if this is right, we need only consider the case of proper names to see that it will often be a matter of luck whether the relevant intentions are possible for both of two communities, between which we are translating. To make the point at its least complicated, it is no surprise that you cannot exactly say in Twi that the wall is, well, burnt sienna.

This impossibility, though of the first importance in translation, is not theoretically puzzling; explanations of why Twi does not have the concept of burnt sienna or of a neutral boson are too obvious to be worth giving. What I am inclined to deny is the more exciting claim—which follows from any view that involves holism about meanings—that we cannot translate any talk at all, because, for example, every sentence in which it can occur subtly shades the meaning of every word, so that "table" and "Tisch" do not mean the same, because nothing adequately gets the sense of "Der Tisch ist gemütlich." In standard circumstances the literal intentions with which I utter "It's a table" and Hans says "Es ist ein Tisch" are, for all the arguments I know, the same.

On this topic I am only saying where I stand, not making arguments: if I am right, there are barriers to translation to be noted here, but, as I say, while they are important to an understanding of why translation is so difficult, they do not seem theoretically puzzling. If you cannot conventionally communicate a certain literal intention in language A and you can in language B, then the translator cannot produce a literal translation; that is all it amounts to.

IV

But literal intentions as we have seen are not the only ones that can operate by the Gricean mechanism. Searle makes a distinction between direct and indirect speech-acts, the key to which is whether the main point of the utterance is accounted for by the literal intentions: if not, then what is primarily being communicated is being communicated indirectly. Notice, in passing, that the distinction between indirect and direct is not the same as the distinction between literal and non-literal uses: I may say "There's an ant on your shoulder" with the primary intention of getting you to recognize by the Gricean mechanism that I care about you, an effect which will depend on what I say being taken literally as well and being seen to be true; or I may say "Juliet is the sun" non-literally (that is, with the intention that you not ascribe to me the literal intentions) but in order to communicate indirectly that Juliet is the central fact of my little universe. In other words, sometimes indirect communication proceeds by way of the literal intentions and sometimes it doesn't. All of this can be captured in translation, provided the relevant literal intentions are available.

V

Let us look back at the proverbs with which I began, and explore them for a moment with some of these distinctions in mind. What you need now, along with all this apparatus, is a little richer—or to advert to the Geertzean vocabulary of my title, thicker—contextualization. These sayings belong to a *genre*—what I have called the proverb, which in Twi is called *ébé* (pl. *mmé*)—that is well-known to speakers of that language. In the case of the last proverb—the drongo says: if he had known that the palm nuts were going to ripen, then he would not have married the raffia palm with a twisted leg—it is recognizable by its *form* as a proverb; speaker and hearers of such a proverb mutually know (in the technical sense introduced above) that drongos don't speak and that one kind of *ébé* begins "The such-and-such says:..." and thus have mutual knowledge, in the ordinary course of things, that this is, indeed, *mmébuo,* proverb-making.[8]

The first immediate consequence of this mutual recognition is that the literal intentions are, so to speak, cancelled. Just as, when I begin a narration with the words "Once upon a time..." I withdraw the usual licence to suppose that I believe what I am saying to be, as we say, literally true, so recognition that I am uttering an *ébé* cancels the implication that what I am saying is literally true. (It does not carry the implication that what I say is literally *false,* however. Precisely, mutual recognition that I am uttering a proverb, which says that P, has the consequence that we mutually know that my intention is not to indicate that I believe that P.) What makes this case different from the fairy-tale "Once upon a time..." is that a different intention is now conventionally implied: an implication to the effect that, starting with the literal meaning—starting from the very literal intentions I have "cancelled"—and building on mutually known fact (some of it, perhaps, extremely context-bound), you can work out a truth that I *do* intend to express.

Thus, in a typical use of the first proverb, for example—Asém a éthia Akanfoö no na Ntafoö de goro brékété [A matter which troubles the Akan people, the people of Gonja take to play the brékété drum]—I might utter it in the midst of an argument with my father about whether it matters that I do not want to go to church with him one Sunday; our contrasting attitudes, he will infer, are being likened to the contrasting attitudes of Dagomba and Akan peoples—for the brékété drum is one they play for entertainment at dances, and represents fun. "Different peoples have different attitudes" is the generalization that seems to cover both cases, the one we may suppose he will grasp, by the Gricean mechanism, as my target thought. In this inference the literal intentions of the proverb-sentence have to be identified to go through the reasoning—the literal meaning is there and is what the sentence means; but it is not what I mean by it, not the indirect burden of the speech-act, which marks itself by its form as non-literally intended.

But now I want to point out that I am only saying about the proverb what Davidson, I think, meant to say about metaphors: namely that in so far as the sentences used in them literally mean anything, they literally mean exactly what they say. They have utterance meanings, and those utterance meanings are the ones that convention associates with those words in that order. But in the

broader sense of meaning, in the sense of meaning which has to do with understanding adequately why someone has spoken as she has—where that means, minimally, understanding what she intends us to understand by way of the Gricean mechanism—it is plain that neither metaphors nor proverbs mean only what they say.

VI

I have been essentially accepting the thought that meaning in the broadest sense is what is communicated by the Gricean mechanism. Literal intentions work in the Gricean way; I have suggested that the proverbs do, too, though I have not said much about how. It is clear I think that metaphor works like this, however the details go. On one sort of contemporary view, "Juliet is the sun" is a literal falsehood which invites us to think of Juliet as standing to the speaker as the sun stands to the world; on another, resurrected by Bob Fogelin, it is elliptical for a simile whose rough meaning is that "Juliet has a significant number of the (contextually) salient features of the sun."[9] So she is central, a source of warmth and nourishment, enlivening, important and—one must add prosaically—… and so on. But on either view the metaphor is supposed to work by getting you to see how it is supposed to work and getting you to recognize that that is how I want you to understand it. And here both convention (*metaphor,* however it works in detail, is mutually known to all of us) and specific features of the mutual knowledge of speaker and hearer that derives from context interact to produce meaning.

What philosophers of language have largely attended to in thinking about meaning are these Gricean aspects of meaning—they include both what are normally thought of as semantical and as pragmatic phenomena, and they broadly, as I say, exhaust the range of philosophical interest in language. Having identified this interest and its scope, my argument from now is directed towards examining the ways in which the point of much translation transcends what I am calling the Gricean aspects of meaning.

VII

And to begin to see why, let us observe that the sorts of things I have been saying about meaning are not much favored by those who spend their time in literary studies, in part, I think, because faced with a real live text, it seems bizarrely inappropriate to spend one's time speculating about the author's intentions: the author may be long dead, unknown to us, uninteresting, and surely, it will seem, her intentions have nothing to do with what we are interested in. Nor do I disagree with any of this: whether a work is fictional or not, our literary interest in it has usually very little to do with psychological facts about its historical author. But it remains true that in order to begin to have a literary understanding of many texts, we must usually first know its language well enough to be able to identify what the intentions conventionally associated with each of its sentences are: that we must begin with the literal meanings of words, phrases, sentences. More than this, in

understanding many of the texts that we address as literary, we must grasp not merely the literal intentions but the whole message that would be communicated by the utterance of the sentence in more ordinary settings: metaphor and implicature, as they occur in fiction, occur also outside it. These more complex elements of the Gricean message of the utterance in its context also occur with the usual intentions suspended: we do not have to believe that Jane Austen tells us that "it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" in order to express her own ironic attitude to the relations of marriage, gender and property, but we *are* plainly meant to rely on our understanding of the fact that an utterance of this sentence would convey that ironic attitude outside the fiction.

Many, perhaps most texts, in other words, require us to grasp the Gricean burden that the words would bear in ordinary uses. But only "most"; for with some texts—symbolist poems, late James Joyce, the productions of the dada "poets"—it seems that, while we often need to understand the roles that the words in those texts play in their more normal habitats, there is no intention at all that our language associates with the strings of words that fall between periods. And sometimes, as in Joyce (and "Jabberwocky"), we do not even have word-meanings to rely on: the words themselves often have no established meaning—no rules for how they should contribute to determining literal intentions; and what we then do is either to see them as made from existing words, invoking those meanings, or to rely on associations of sound and thought that are based on other things than meanings, or, perhaps, to give up altogether!

But even in the case of narrative fiction, where the sentences do not raise these problems of identifying the literal intentions, I agree, as I say, that the literal intentions can hardly be the point of the matter, since to be packaged as a fiction is to be offered with the literal intentions cancelled.

It is a serious question, I think, why on earth we should have the practice of producing language whose understanding requires us both to grasp what would have been its literal intentions and to accept that these are not the writer's intentions in the present case. It is a question about whether we can *justify* the practice of fiction externally. It is plain, I think, that we *can,* though the story is complicated and has many elements, but that is not an issue to pursue now. What is important now is that literary practice, like linguistic practice, is conventional—which is to say it is governed by a specific structure of mutual expectations—but that these literary conventions—unlike linguistic conventions—do not usually invoke the Gricean mechanism.

Akan uses of proverbs are, in this respect, quite atypical. To use a proverb *as such* is, as I said, to imply that, starting with the literal meaning—starting from the very literal intentions I have "cancelled"—and building on mutually known fact (some of it, perhaps, extremely context-bound), you can work out a truth that I *do* intend to express, even though it is not the truth associated with the literal intentions. This is a feature that proverbs share with two genres of fiction—the parable and the fable—but not with most others. While the form of the novel is constrained by historically developing conventions, those conventions do not carry a message: are not, that is, supposed to operate in such a way as to allow us to read off the governing intentions of the author, to answer the question, "why did she write

this?" And it is for this reason, I think, that attention to intentions—in the novel and in many other genres—is likely to strike us as a mistake.

Literary conventions, simply put, make possible acts that can be defined by reference not only to the meanings—both literal and non-literal, direct and indirect—of utterances, but also to features that are broadly formal—alliteration, meter, rhyme, plot-structure. What they do not usually do—and here, as I say, proverbs are an exception—is determine how we should construct a meaning—in the sense of a set of intentions operating through the Gricean mechanism—for the work.

Because the novel and the sonnet are not conventionally constituted by a process of meaning-generation, there is no set of conventions to which we can refer, analogous to the conventions of literal meaning, for deciding what the work means; there are no literary intentions, conventional and Gricean, to correspond to literal intentions. Because there are literal intentions we can say what a literal assertoric utterance is for—it is to communicate such-and-such information; it may be possible, then, in literal translation, to find a sentence in a target language that has more or less the same literal intentions as the utterance in the object-language. If it is not possible, it may be clear enough why: there is no way of expressing that thought in the target language, perhaps because the referent of some term is unknown there, or because a social practice in which the utterance is embedded—the curse, say—is absent. Success and failure at this level are well-enough defined.

But for literary translation our object is not to produce a text that reproduces the literal intentions of the author—not even the one's she is cancelling—but to produce something that shares the central literary properties of the object-text; and, as is obvious, these are very much under-determined by its literal meaning, even in the cases where it has one. A literary translation, so it seems to me, aims at producing a text whose relation both to the literary and to the linguistic conventions of the culture of the translation is relevantly like the relations of the object-text to its culture's conventions. A precise set of parallels is likely to be impossible, just because the chances that metrical and other formal features of a work can be reproduced while preserving the identity of literal and non-literal, direct and indirect, meaning are vanishingly small.

And, in fact, we may choose, rightly, to translate a term in a way that is unfaithful to the literal intentions, because we are trying to preserve formal features that seem more crucial. But even if we did not have to make such choices, even if we could, *per impossibile,* meet all the constraints of the Gricean meaning and all the literary conventions, we would not have produced the perfect translation: we could do better, we could aim to reproduce literary qualities of the object-text that are not a matter of the conventions.

So that the reason why we cannot speak of the perfect translation here is not that there is a definite set of desiderata and we know they cannot all be met; it is rather that there is no definite set of desiderata. A translation aims to produce a new text that matters to one community the way another text matters to another: but it is part of our understanding of why texts matter that this is not a question that convention settles; indeed, it is part of our understanding of literary judgment, that there can always be new readings, new things that matter about a text, new reasons for caring about new properties.

VIII

It is a feature, simply put, of the written text that we do not have settled and definite ideas about what matters about it. What is also clear is that in our culture we have settled on a particular set of institutional mechanisms for addressing the question of what matters. As my friend John Guillory argued recently in a paper on the "Canonical and Non-Canonical: A Critique of the Current Debate," in *English Literary History,*[10] the role of literature, indeed, the formation of the concept, the institution of "literature"—which is to say *our* concept of it—is indissoluble from pedagogy. Roland Barthes expressed the point in a characteristic—and justly oft-cited—apothegm:

> "l'enseignement de la littérature" est pour moi presque tautologique.
> La littérature, c'est ce qui s'enseigne, un point c'est tout.[11]

Abstracted from its context, this formulation no doubt requires some qualifying glosses. But let me express the point only slightly hyperbolically: what counts as a fine translation of a literary text—which is to say a taught text—is that it should preserve for us the features that make it worth teaching.

Questions of adequacy of translation thus inherit the indeterminacy of questions about the adequacy of the understanding displayed in the process we now call "reading"—which is to say that process of writing about texts which is engaged in by people who teach them. If I may be excused the solecism of quoting what I myself have written elsewhere.

> To focus on the issue of whether a reading is *correct* is to invite the question, "What is it that a reading is supposed to give a correct account *of?*" The quick answer—one that, as we shall immediately see, tells us less than it pretends to—is, of course, "the text." But the text exists as linguistic, as historical, as commercial, as political event; and while each of these ways of conceiving the very same object provides opportunities for pedagogy, each provides different opportunities: opportunities between which we must choose. We are inclined at the moment to talk about this choice as if the purposes by which it is guided were, in some sense, given. But were that true, we would have long agreed on the nature of a literary reading: and there is surely little doubt that the concept of a "literary reading," like the concept of "literature" is what W.B.Gallic used to call an "essentially contested concept." To understand what a reading is, is to understand that what counts as a reading is always up for grabs.[12]

In the same place I argued that we should give up language that implies an epistemology in which the work has already a meaning that is waiting for us to find and ask instead what modes of reading are productive. Since reading in this sense is, as I have suggested, so strongly bound up with questions about teaching, answers to the question "What modes of reading are productive?" will derive from an ethics and politics of literary pedagogy: from a sense about why we

should teach texts, *which* we should teach, what this teaching is worth to our students, and so on. And what this notion suggests, of course, for the concerns of this talk is that we might seek to operate with a correlative notion of productive modes of translation.

Such an approach to translation—like the approach I have elsewhere suggested in the same pragmatist spirit to what literary scholars call "reading"—will depend on our having some sense of what our practice—of teaching or translating—is for. I have surreptitiously introduced assumptions about the kind of translation I am discussing by inventing what may have struck some of you as the artificial category of the literary translation. Actually this term might be used equally well to denote two rather different kinds of activity. I might have meant by it—though I did not—a translation that aims itself to be a literary work, a work worth teaching, a work whose value as an object of study depends very little on what it tells us about the culture from which the object-text it translates has come. Such translations—Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat* as opposed to that of Peter Avery and John Heath-Stubbs—can be read as rewardingly as any literary works.

But I had in mind a different notion of a literary translation; that, namely, of a translation that aims to be of use in literary teaching; and here it seems to me that such "academic" translation, translation that seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context, is eminently worth doing. I have called this "thick translation"; and I shall say in a moment why. But before I do say *why*, I should like to say something about the purposes that I would urge for this sort of activity, the purposes by which its productivity may be judged.

Remember what I said at the start: utterances are the products of actions, which like all actions, are undertaken for reasons. Understanding the reasons characteristic of other cultures and (as an instance of this) other times is part of what our teaching is about: this is especially important because in the easy atmosphere of relativism—in the world of "that's just your opinion" that pervades the high schools that produce our students—one thing that can get entirely lost is the rich differences of human life in culture. One thing that needs to be challenged by our teaching is the confusion of relativism and tolerance so scandalously perpetuated by Allan Bloom, in his, the latest in a long succession of American jeremiad. And that, of course, is a task for my sort of teaching—philosophical teaching—and it is one I am happy to accept. But there is a role here for literary teaching also, in challenging this easy tolerance, which amounts not to a celebration of human variousness but to a refusal to attend to how various other people really are or were. A thick description of the context of literary production, a translation that draws on and creates that sort of understanding, meets the need to challenge ourselves and our students to go further, to undertake the harder project of a genuinely informed respect for others. Until we face up to difference, we cannot see what price tolerance is demanding of us.

In the American academy, therefore, the translation of African texts seems to me to need to be directed at least by such purposes as these: the urge to continue the repudiation of racism (and, at the same time, through explorations of feminist issues and women's writing, of sexism); the need to extend the American imagination—an imagination that regulates much of the world system economically

and politically—beyond the narrow scope of the United States; the desire to develop views of the world elsewhere that respect more deeply the autonomy of the Other, views that are not generated solely by the legitimate but local political needs of America's multiple diasporas.

To stress such purposes in translation is to argue that, from the standpoint of an analysis of the current cultural situation—an analysis that is frankly political— certain purposes are productively served by the literary, the text-teaching, institutions of the academy. To offer our proverbs to American students is to invite them, by showing how sayings can be used within an oral culture to communicate in ways that are complex and subtle, to a deeper respect for the people of pre-industrial societies.

Let me end by saying that such a way of understanding reading and translating will make the question of how we should do it highly context-dependent; so that, to teach these proverbs in the English-speaking academy in Africa is a different matter yet again. If one believes that the kinds of cultural inferiority complexes represented in the attitudes of many African students need to be exorcised, then the teaching of "oral" literature in the Westernized academy in Africa will require an approach that does two crucial things: first, stress that the continuities between pre-colonial forms of cultural production and contemporary ones are genuine (and thus provide a modality through which students can value and incorporate the African past); second, challenge directly the assumption of the cultural superiority of the West, both by undermining the aestheticized conceptions of value that it presupposes, and by distinguishing sharply between a domain of technological skill in which—once goals are granted—comparisons of efficiency are possible, and a domain of value, in which such comparisons are by no means so unproblematic.[13] This final challenge—to the assumption of Western cultural superiority—requires us, in the last analysis, to expose the ways in which the systematic character of literary (and, more broadly, aesthetic) judgments of value is the product of certain institutional practices and not something that exists independently of those practices and institutions. But it requires, at the start, a thick and situated understanding of oral literatures of the sort for which I have, I am sure, provided only the barest hint of a sketch; the sort of understanding that will leave you able both to understand and understand the truth in the words with which I began:

> Asém a éhia Akanfoö no na Ntafoö de goro brékété.
> A matter which troubles the Akan people, the people of Gonja take to play the brékété drum.

Notes

1 Brékété is the (Akan) name of one of the main Dagomba drums, which accompanies dancing.
2 The most obvious thought suggested by this proverb is that if one has to choose among evils one should choose the least of them. (The proverb is typical of a

whole class of proverbs that depend on playing with the similar-sounding names of dissimilar objects.)

3   Or one of the thoughts. The conventions allow for all kinds of ambiguity.

4   Putting it this way avoids taking sides on questions about whether or not our semantics should be one that assigns content in a broadly direct realist manner. I think that for many terms direct realism about contents is correct: but that is a separate issue here.

5   And, since epistemic authority in respect of one's own beliefs is normal, while the authority to command others assumes certain relations of power, the range of intentions one can intelligibly be held to have depends, in the case of commands, in part on what speaker and hearer know about their power-relations.

6   Of course the conventions may make the intentions depend on features of the context—what is perceptually salient, what has just been said, what time it is, and a whole host of more such features.

7   Philosophers will probably want at this point to suggest that the right way to proceed here is to insist on differences I have been blurring: between utterance-meaning and speaker-meaning; or between what is directly communicated and what indirectly; or between properties of the token-sentence and of the type. For them, let me say that in the ordinary cases these notions connect with those I have been using in the following way: the meaning of the token-utterance is the speaker-meaning conventionally associated with a standard unadorned utterance of the token when the contextual features conventionally determined as relevant are those of the actual context of utterance; the meaning of the type-utterance is the function from contexts to token-utterance meanings; the speaker-meaning conventionally associated with an utterance is fixed by the literal intentions associated with it, the intentions an utterer of the token unadorned and in standard circumstances is conventionally recognized as having.

8   This proverb would naturally be used in a context where someone has expressed vain regrets. The thought is something like this: that if you (the drongo) had known that one person (the palm-nuts) would prosper, you would not have relied on a person who was less successful (the crippled raffia-palm.)

9   Robert J.Fogelin, *Figuratively Speaking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

10   John Guillory, "Canonical and Non-Canonical: A Critique of the Current Debate," *ELH* 54 (1987).

11   "'The Teaching of Literature' is for me almost tautological. Literature is what is taught, that is all." "Reflections sur un manuel" in Tzvetan Todorov and Serge Doubrovsky, *Enseignement de la littérature* (Paris: Pion, 1971), 170.

12   "Out of Africa: Topologies of Nativism," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 2.1 (1988):153–78.

13   These are, in essence, the prescriptions of "Topologies of Nativism" (see above).

Basil Hatim and Ian Mason

POLITENESS IN SCREEN TRANSLATING

W E NOW TURN to an entirely different mode of translating, that of film subtitling, in order to show discourse processes of a similar kind at work. In this chapter, the emphasis will be on the pragmatic dimension of context and we shall see how the constraints of particular communicative tasks affect variously the textural devices employed both in original screen writing and in the writing of subtitles. It will immediately be realized that we are here confronted with mixed modes. Unlike the dubber, who translates speech into speech, the subtitler has to represent in the written mode what is spoken on the soundtrack of the film.

It would be superfluous here to enter into a detailed description of the task of the subtitler (for a full account of what is involved, see for example Vöge (1977), Titford (1982)). For our purposes, it will suffice to summarize the main constraints on subtitling, which create particular kinds of difficulties for the translator. They are, broadly speaking, of four kinds:

1   The shift in mode from speech to writing. This has the result that certain features of speech (non-standard dialect, emphatic devices such as intonation, code-switching and style-shifting, turn-taking) will not automatically be represented in the written form of the target text.
2   Factors which govern the medium or channel in which meaning is to be conveyed. These are physical constraints of available space (generally up to 33, or in some cases 40 keyboard spaces per line; no more than two lines on screen)[1] and the pace of the sound-track dialogue (titles may remain on screen for a minimum of two and a maximum of seven seconds).
3   The reduction of the source text as a consequence of (2) above. Because of

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this the translator has to reassess coherence strategies in order to maximize the retrievability of intended meaning from a more concise target language version. In face-to-face communication, the normal redundancy of speech gives hearers more than one chance of picking up intended meaning; in subtitling, the redundancy is inevitably reduced and chances of retrieving lost meaning are therefore fewer. Moreover, unlike other forms of written communication, this mode does not allow the reader to back-track for the purpose of retrieving meaning.

4   The requirement of matching the visual image. As Chaume [1998] points out, the acoustic and visual images are inseparable in film and, in translating, coherence is required between the subtitled text and the moving image itself. Thus, matching the subtitle to what is actually visible on screen may at times create an additional constraint.

Some of the studies which have been carried out have concentrated on the effect of these constraints on the form of the translation. Goris (1993) and Lambert (1990) note the levelling effect of the mode-shift and, in particular, the way in which features of speech which are in any way non-standard tend to be eliminated. Lambert speaks of *"un style zéro"* and Goris, comparing user variation in subtitling and dubbing, observes that, in the latter, social dialect is under-represented in terms of prosodic features of speech but quite well represented lexically; in subtitling, on the other hand, neither prosodic features nor variant lexis appear to be represented.

Politeness

In an earlier study (Mason 1989), we observed that one area of meaning which appeared consistently to be sacrificed in subtitling was that of interpersonal pragmatics and, in particular, politeness features. In what follows, we hope to illustrate how **politeness** is almost inevitably underrepresented in this mode of translating and to suggest what the effects of this might be. Additionally, we shall point to further research which might be carried out in this particular area of translation studies.

We use the term politeness in the sense intended by Brown and Levinson (1987), on which much of this chapter is based. It is important to establish immediately that the term is not used here in its conventional sense of displaying courtesy but rather it is intended to cover all aspects of language usage which serve to establish, maintain or modify interpersonal relationships between text producer and text receiver.

Brown and Levinson's theory rests on the assumption that all competent language users have the capacity of reasoning and have what is known as **"face"**. Face is defined as:

> the public self-image that everyone lays claim to, consisting of two related aspects: