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Cultural Translation: Why it is important and where to start with it

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Let me introduce the problem by quoting one question: “Every five years one of the most important exhibitions of modern and contemporary art takes place in Kassel. What is it called?” People interested in culture and arts, mostly members of the well-educated middle class, also known in Germany as Bildungsbürgertum, can, for sure, easily answer this question. But the question is not addressed to them. In fact this is the 85th question of a test, which one has to pass (in the federal state of Hessen) in order to achieve German citizenship. There are actually many more other questions (100 altogether) in the test, mostly dealing with German history, German Constitution, civil rights, the German juridical and political system, German culture, sport, national symbols, etc. Some of the questions are quite peculiar. For instance: “A woman shouldn’t be allowed to go out in public or to travel alone without a company of male relatives. What is your opinion on this?”; “Please explain the right of Israel to exist”, or “If someone says the Holocaust is a myth or a fairy tale, what would you answer?”, etc.

Let us put aside the content of these questions and ask rather what their purpose actually is, or more precisely, what the purpose of these hundred correct answers is. They are all together supposed to be an answer to one particular question: "What is German". In other words, they are supposed to describe the content of the notion of "German identity". They are, if you like, some sort of a small and quick – an instant – canon of features supposed to definitely separate German from non-German, that is to draw a boundary line between them and so to exclude the Other from the German.

In fact, all hundred questions are constructed as a sort of a canon of canons. There is a canon of German literature: notorious Goethe, Schiller, the winners of the Nobel-prize such as Heinrich Boell, Thomas Mann, etc; there is furthermore a canon of the biggest German rivers, of the highest mountains; a canon of the most important historical events as well as a canon of the most famous German scientists; of course there is also a canon of the most important cultural features or values, which define German cultural identity in terms of a German "way of life" (the way "a real German", allegedly, treats women, children, different religions, different opinions, etc).

In its content as well as in its practical application the test is a perfect example of the fundamental contradiction of an identitarian discourse: the contradiction between its essentialist claims and its self-constructed character.

It is not difficult to see how arbitrary this self-construction has been made. Even its actual political motivation (the exclusion of one particular identity, the so-called Islamist one) is completely disclosed. On the other hand this bunch of features is openly attached (one could also say: essentialized) to the allegedly unique,

original character of being German. Does really knowing what happens with contemporary art every five years in Kassel really make you German? It sounds stupid, but in the context of the test for German citizenship the answer is – yes!
How then to deal with this nonsense, which has to be taken quite seriously, for its effects – being granted or not granted citizenship of one democratic, relatively rich and stable society – can decide not only one's quality of life, but also one's own fate?

Moreover, this nonsense – more precisely the above mentioned contradiction behind it – informs in a fundamental way what we perceive as our political reality today, for it creates its very basement, the human substratum of the society: it decides directly who belongs and who doesn't to the society we live in and so shapes the forces our political reality is made of.
The example of German the citizenship-test is therefore only one, more visible, manifestation of a common principle: our societies and consequently our perception of the political reality are culturally framed. This throws light on one of the most striking phenomena of the "postmodern condition", the so-called cultural turn. Culture has not, as it is often believed, simply pushed away the notion of society from the political stage and taken its leading role in theoretical debates and practical concerns of political subjects. The change is more radical. Culture has become this very stage, the very condition of the possibility of society and of our perception of what political reality is today. This is the reason why democracy, that is the quest for freedom and equality, as well as the pursuit of social justice, welfare etc. appear today as being culturally determined.

It is in this context that the notion of translation, or more precisely, of cultural translation has got an immense importance. For it can be applied on both sides of the contradiction between

essentialist and constructivist understanding of culture, that is either in order to arrange relations between different cultures or in order to subvert – as a sort of a reconstructed universalism – the very idea of an original cultural identity. In other words, the concept of cultural translation can be generally understood and applied in service of both contradictory paradigms of postmodern theory and postmodern political visions: multiculturalism and deconstruction.

As it is well known, multiculturalism is based on the concept of the uniqueness and originality of cultural formations. It assumes that there is an essential connection between culture and racial, sexual or ethnic origin. From this perspective multiculturalism challenges the very idea of universality, for it sees every universal concept as culturally relative. There is no universal culture, but a plurality of different cultures either tolerantly recognizing or violently excluding each other. For multiculturalists our world is nothing but a sort of cluster of different identities that we will never be able to sublate. To give an example: in the field of literature, multiculturalism would challenge the notion of world literature, that is the idea of a canon of masterpieces, which, as Goethe once stated, articulate in the best way what is universal in human nature. From the multicultural point of view there is only a plurality of specific canons instead, each of them originating in some sort of essential identity. Therefore we cannot talk about world literature, but only about “German”, “French”, or “white, “black”, or “male”, “female”, “gay” literature including also a combination of these identitarian features like “white male”, “black female”, or “Latin-American-black-female”, etc. literature or culture.

Multiculturalism is the very base of what we call identitarian politics – a political practice, which still decisively shapes our world

today. Although it emphasizes the rights of minorities and marginal communities within a homogenized space of nation state, it legitimates at the same time the right of a specific national or ethnic community to protect – as a majority within the political frame of the nation state – its allegedly unique and original cultural identity. Even our major political visions concerning further development of democracy and prosperity – like the project of European integration – basically follow the same multicultural pattern.

Deconstruction challenges the concept of multiculturalism in its very kernel, in its essentialism, that is, in the idea that every identity has an origin in some sort of a pregiven essence. A culture is for deconstructivists a system of signs, a narrative without any historical or physical origin. Signs are in relation only with one another. This applies even to the difference between signs and non-signs, which constitutes still another level of the sign system. According to this approach, there are no origins at all, but only their traces, only their copies instead and there is no end to the progression or regression of signs in space and time.

This actually means that cultures, too, are never reflections of some natural state of things, but rather constitute or construct their own origin, beyond any racial, sexual, ethnic or genetic essence. Therefore, being "German" or being "black", "female", "gay" etc. is simply a product of a specific cultural activity, a sort of cultural construction. For deconstruction every identity is from its very beginning culturally constructed.

In the case of nations, to repeat it, there is a belief that nations are given, that they persist over time as sort of timeless and eternal essences, that they can be clearly distinguished from other nations, have stable boundaries etc.

This means that they are, to use the well-known phrase coined by Benedict Anderson, imagined communities, which implies that the so-called unity of nation has been constructed through certain discursive and literary strategies. Nation is narration, writes Homi Bhabha. It emerges in human history at certain points in time and as a consequence of certain economic and socio-cultural development. For Gellner these are the conditions for the production of standardized, homogenous, centrally sustained high culture: a free market in commodities as well as labor for instance, or the emergence of a civil society, which can be sufficiently differentiated from the state, so that a sphere of autonomous culture could develop, etc. The so-called national cultures, which nationalists claim to defend and revive, are for Gellner their own inventions.

This is extremely important for our understanding of the phenomenon of translation. Its social and political role becomes clear only on the ground of the historical process of nation building. Only in this context translation acquires meaning, which transcends a purely linguistic horizon and becomes a cultural and political phenomenon, something we call today “cultural translation”.

But what actually is translation ?

A traditional theory of translation understands it as a binary phenomenon: there are always two elements of a translating process, an original text in one language and its secondary production in some other language. It is therefore its relation to the original, which decisively determines every translation. This relation can be of a different nature. For Schleiermacher for instance, a translation has two major possibilities: it could either move the reader towards the author, that is, strictly follow the

original, or rather move the author towards the reader, that is, make the original text in the translation as understandable as possible. Schleiermacher preferred the first option, which implicates that translation provokes on the reader's side a certain feeling of strangeness (das Gefuehl des Fremden) or, as Schleiermacher says, "the impression that they are confronted with something foreign" (dass sie Auslaendisches vor sich haben).

This is typical of the early romantic theory of translation. Actually it does not have, as so many people believe, a fear of alienation (Verfremdung). On the contrary, it welcomes what is strange, different and foreign. Humboldt even urges translators to be faithful to the strangeness of a foreign language and foreign culture and to articulate this strangeness in their translations. Otherwise they would betray – not an original, as one could believe – but their own language, their own nation. Why?

Because for Humboldt the faithfulness of translation is a patriotic virtue. The purpose of translation is not to facilitate the communication between two different languages and cultures, but to build one's own language and, since Humboldt equates language and nation, the actual purpose of translation is to build the nation.

However, the concept of cultural translation, as we understand it today, hasn't arisen out of the traditional translation theory but rather out of its radical criticism articulated for the first time at the beginning of the twenties in Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "The task of the translator".

In his text – and this is essentially new – Benjamin actually got rid of the idea of the original and therefore of the whole binarism of traditional translation theory. A translation for Benjamin does not refer to an original text, it has nothing to do with communication,

its purpose is not to carry meaning, etc. He illustrates the relation between the so-called original and translation by using the metaphor of a tangent: translation is like a tangent, which touches the circle (i.e. the original) in one single point only to follow thereafter its own way.

Neither the original nor the translation, neither the language of the original nor the language of the translation are fixed and persisting categories. They don't have essential quality and are constantly transformed in space and time.

This is the reason why Benjamin's essay became so important for the deconstructionist theory for it so vehemently questions the very idea of an essential origin.

Out of the same deconstructivist tradition emerges also the concept of cultural translation. It has been coined by one of the most prominent theoreticians of the so-called postcolonial condition, Homi Bhabha. His motivation was originally the criticism of multiculturalist ideology, the need to think about culture and about relations between different cultures beyond the idea of unique, essential cultural identities and communities originating in these identities.
Nota bene: There is also a multiculturalist concept of cultural translation. Its political purpose is the stability of the liberal order, which can be achieved only on the grounds of non-conflictual, interactive relations between different cultures in terms of the so-called multicultural cohabitation. This is the reason why liberal multiculturalists understand cultural translation always as an "*inter*-cultural translation".

For Homi Bhabha this would only bring us to the deadlock of identitarian politics, helplessly obsessed with cultural diversity.

Therefore, he suggests instead the concept of the so-called third space. The third space is the space for hybridity, the space for– as he writes in *The Location of Culture* – subversion, transgression, blasphemy, heresy etc. He believes that hybridity – and cultural translation, which he regards as a synonym for hybridity – is in itself politically subversive. Hybridity is also the space where all binary divisions and antagonisms, typical for modernist political concepts, including the old opposition between theory and politics, do not work any more.

Instead of the old dialectical concept of negation, Bhabha talks about negotiation or translation as the only possible way to transform the world and bring about something politically new. So in his view, an emancipatory extension of politics is possible only in the field of cultural production following the logic of cultural translation.

American feminist philosopher Judith Butler uses Bhabha's concept of cultural translation to solve one of the most traumatic problems of postmodern political thought – the above mentioned problem of universality. For Butler the fact that no culture can claim universal validity does not mean that there is nothing universal in the way we experience our world today. The universality she means has also become the problem of cross-cultural translation. It is an effect of exclusion/inclusion processes.

Butler's formula is: Universality can be articulated only in response to its own excluded outside. What has been excluded from the existing concept of universality puts this concept – from its own outside – under pressure, for it wants to be accepted and included into the concept. However, this couldn't happen unless the concept itself has changed as far as necessary to include the excluded. This pressure finally leads to a rearticulation of the

existing concept of universality. The process by which the excluded within the universality is readmitted into the term is what Butler calls translation. Cultural translation – as a "return of the excluded" – is the only promoter of today's democracy. It pushes its limits, brings about social change and opens new spaces of emancipation. It does so through the subversive practices, which change everyday social relations.

Let's emphasize again: the way social change is brought about here is not dialectical. It is transgressive instead. It doesn't happen as a result of clashes between social antagonisms respectively through the process of negation, but through a never-ending transgression of the existing social and cultural limits, through non-violent, democratic, translational negotiations.

Butler's concept of political change through the process of cultural translation still doesn't transcend a generally liberal framework. Gayatri Spivak has gone a step beyond it - which is articulated under similar premises of the postmodern and/or postcolonial reflection and also operates with the notion of translation - with her concept of "strategic essentialism".

Spivak knows very well that by means of today's theoretical reflection we can radically deconstruct almost every possible identity and easily disclose its essentialism as being simply imagined, constructed, etc. However, the politics proper still works with these essential identities – such as nation for instance – as if it wouldn't know that they are only our illusions. Therefore, if we want to bring about some real political change, she suggests "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest"[1].

This is the reason why the concept of "strategic essentialism" should be understood as a kind of translation, too. For the historical situation we live in articulates itself in two different languages: that of postmodern anti-essentialist theory and that of a parallel, old essentialist political practice. Spivak's concept of "strategic essentialism" simply admits that there is no direct correspondence between these two languages – they cannot be sublated in an old dialectical way by a third universal term which could operate as a dialectical unity of both. Therefore, the only possible way of a communication between them is a kind of translation.

But how does this translation actually work? As it seems, the right answer has been given already in 1943. By Bertolt Brecht:

"In Los Angeles, before the judge who examines people trying to become citizens of the United States, came an Italian restaurant keeper. After grave preparations, hindered, though, by his ignorance of the new language, in the test he replied to the question:
What is the 8th Amendment? falteringly: 1492.
Since the law demands that applicants know the language, he was refused. Returning after three months spent on further studies, yet hindered still by ignorance of the new language,
he was confronted this time with the question:
Who was the victorious general in the Civil War? His answer was: 1492.
(Given amiably, in a loud voice). Sent away again.
And returning a third time, he answered a third question:
For how long a term are our Presidents elected? Once more with: 1492.
Now the judge, who liked the man, realized that he could not learn the language.

He wanted to know how he earned his living and was told: by hard work.
And so, at his fourth appearance, the judge gave him the question: When was America discovered?
And on the strength of his correctly answering 1492, he was granted his citizenship."

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[1] Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York : Methuen, 1987, p. 205.