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The Stakes of Translation

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I.

In accordance with the linguistic origin of the concept of translation, the notion of "cultural translation" immediately implies a reference to a *context of expression*. For if it is the case that, as Roman Jakobson says, "the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign," if in fact a sign can be "converted" by virtue of such translation "into a more explicit designation,"[1] then at least the following three points deserve emphasis: 1) Every sign (far from being the mere indication of what it refers to) maintains complex relations of distinction and demarcation with other signs, but also of a solidarity that is difficult to determine; relations which provide for its translatability, and hence generate meaning. 2) Yet signs are also intensive magnitudes, i.e., they imply degrees of explicitness that at first seem founded in the relation between *that which is expressed* and the specific manifest *expression*; that is the only way to understand the idea of more or less "explicit"[2] signification. 3) In the end, it is virtually impossible to reduce this explicitness—as Jakobson seems to be suggesting in the quoted passages—to questions of univocality or of the more precise specification of (fixed or produced) meanings without abstracting from the concrete

speakers as *centers of expression* and hence, with all theoretical and political consequences that entails, from the different planes of linguistic action and its respective contextual situation.

How, then, does this context of expression, which would be the locus of the question of translation, present in the field of those theory-formations in which the notion of "cultural translation" is presently being used? The implicit fundamental presuppositions of these theory-formations, which are found mostly in the environs of Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies, can be sketched as follows: only insofar as something comes to expression in "a culture," or in "culture at large"—that is to say, insofar as a margin of difference is opened up between that which is expressed and the specific manifest expression—can one assume that "cultural matters" or "cultures" are translatable; it is this translatability that founds the production of "cultural" meanings. In this conception of "cultural translation" modeled on linguistic translation, "culture" means not simply the point of departure or the target of this translation (the "culture" *that* or *from which* one translates, and the "culture" *into which* something is translated) but equally the medium of translation and its practice as a material activity. Only insofar as translation is itself understood to be a "cultural" activity —and the "cultural" centers of expression are at once centers of translation—will translation be able to actualize "culture" as its medium such that the "cultural something" that forms the point of departure and reference of translation can be brought to differential emergence once more as "something cultural."

These presuppositions, however, prompt a double question. On the one hand—and that is only one of the reasons why I think it indispensable to mark the words "culture," "cultural," etc. as the titles of problems by the systematic use of quotation marks—: to apply, without further ado, the concept of translation to "culture"

indubitably perpetuates the parallelization of the theories of language and culture that, although dignified by a tradition of almost 250 years (ever since the notion of culture has been spreading through the production of scientific discourse as well as public debate), is no less problematic for it; in the following, I will be able to return to this only cursorily and indirectly. On the other hand, however, and it is this point that the following considerations will revolve around, it is questionable whether the theories that speak of "cultural translation" offer any proper conceptualization of the problem of expression.

To make my case right away: I think one can show that, at least in large areas, Cultural Studies (as well as the neighboring cultural theories and the political theories that refer to Cultural Studies in grounding their political commitments) tacitly draw on something that we can tentatively call the "structure of expression," but do not think it—or prematurely insert it into their respective conceptual configurations—precisely because a specific reception of structuralist and post-structuralist theorems in Cultural Studies presents "structure" and "expression" as mutually incompatible perspectives. Nonetheless, and problems of theory aside, it is precisely the political and emancipatory pretensions of Cultural Studies that make a better understanding of the "structure of expression" of political articulations appear desirable.

II.

Judith Butler's intervention in the debate, initiated by Martha Nussbaum in 1994, over the question of the cosmopolitan[3] can serve here as a first example of this double gesture of drawing on the expressive while suppressing any discussion that might render the parallelization of the expressive and "cultural" concerns

questionable. From the very beginning of her contribution, Butler leaves no doubt that the universality to which Nussbaum's defense of the cosmopolitan had appealed can be rendered intellectual justice only when the different "cultural" articulations of the universal are taken into account. I highlight the central and yet undiscussed role of "articulation" in the following quotations by italicizing: the fact that "[...] there are cultural conditions for its *articulation*" becomes apparent "when the meaning of 'the universal' proves to be culturally variable, and the specific *articulations* of the universal work against its claim to a transcultural status." [4] Hence, according to Butler, one has to consider the possibility—in view e.g. of the formulation of certain universal rights—that in them "the universal is only partially *articulated*, and that we do not yet know what forms it may take."[5] In what follows, Butler entrusts the dissolution of the difficulty thus indicated to the idea of a progressive (though not necessarily "progressivist") negotiation process that is nourished by the "performative contradiction" [6] between the conventional formulations of the universal in currency at any time, and those articulations that, from a position of non-inclusion in these formulations, announce their claim to inclusion. Referring to Homi Bhabha, she calls this process one of "cultural translation." [7]

In Butler's remarks, we quite evidently reencounter the triad of that which is expressed, the specific manifest expression, and the centers of expression that I sketched at the outset. Just as evidently, however, the three structural elements of the context of expression are tied up in a thematic and conceptual context that reduces the problem of expression (or of "articulation") to a kind of subtext, and instead foregrounds a schematic opposition of universality and ("cultural") particularity: that which is expressed is

the universal (if only partially articulated), the specific manifest expressions are "culturally" variable articulations, and the centers of expression are those objects of exclusion who, by virtue of their articulation, assert their claim to be admitted into the present formulations of the universal. Yet as much as Butler presents "articulation" as the driving force proper of "performative contradiction" (and hence of political and social change), her notion of articulation itself remains obscure.

The consequences of this obscurity concern primarily the tacit presupposition, hardly a matter of course, that the enactment of performative contradictions on the plane of articulation *ipso facto* entails an (emancipatory) transformation of present conditions of political and social inclusion and exclusion. More specifically, they concern e.g. the question of how "emancipatory" articulations that assert a legal claim to inclusion in the present formulations can be distinguished—and distinguished on the plane of the articulation itself—from articulations that, from an alleged or factual position of exclusion, attempt to assert their "right" by virtue of the exclusion of others. [8] In both cases, the problem of expression presents as a *problem of correspondence*, and not only in the form of the question *to what degree* articulations correspond to given political and social conditions of exclusion or, more generally (and especially since the exercise of authority occurs not only through exclusions) relations of authority: but also in the form of the question as to the *kind* of this correspondence. With respect to the question of "cultural translation": what kind of correspondence obtains between what is called "cultural translation" and the question of political and social change to which this notion claims to offer an answer?

Of course, it would be nonsense to claim that these problems have received no attention at all from more recent cultural and political

theories in the environs of Cultural Studies. And it would be no less nonsensical to claim that those who did in fact confront these problems have framed a consistent answer to them. Yet not all theorists did in fact confront them: for instance, Homi Bhabha himself, from whom Butler takes the notion of "cultural translation," is content with brushing the problem of expression off in favor of a "textuality" to which cultural-theoretical analysis can refer without further ado, and which is at the same time identified with the political: "[t]extuality is not simply a second-order ideological expression or a verbal symptom of a pre-given political subject"; quite the reverse, as Bhabha continues: "the political subject—as indeed the subject of politics—is a discursive event." [9]

In comparison, the following passage, from Stuart Hall's 1992 lecture on "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies", is more helpful—and at the same time legible as an indirect and anticipatory commentary on Bhabha—: We are asked "to assume that culture will always work through its textualities—and at the same time that textuality is never enough. But never enough of what? Never enough for what? That is an extremely difficult question to answer because, philosophically, it has always been impossible in the theoretical field of cultural studies [...] to get anything like an adequate theoretical account of culture's relations and its effects."[10] From the perspective suggested here, Hall's obvious disconcertment concerns not simply an "extra-textual" plane at which the discontent of textuality could be made to approach a saturation, but precisely the problem of expression, that is, the question of the expressive structure and expressivity inscribed in textuality itself on which the answers as to "of what" and "for what" would hinge. And it establishes an explicit connection between the difficulty thus indicated and the necessity,

which is frankly expressed, to arrive at a theoretical clarification of the notion of culture and its implications—a clarification often avoided within Cultural Studies or fended off with all too generalized statements.

But Hall's texts have not always expressed such disconcertment. For instance, in the media theory essay entitled "Encoding/ Decoding" from 1980, Hall introduces the category of "social reality" without offering any theoretical elucidation of it; diffuse cross-fading between the planes of "meaning" and "social reality" permits him to locate, in *any and all* social practices, textual encodings in which relations of power and authority become legible. "These codes are the means by which power and ideology are made to signify in particular discourses. They refer signs to the 'maps of meaning' by which any culture is classified; those 'maps of social reality' have the whole range of social meanings, practices, and usages, power and interest, 'written in' to them."[11]

Of central importance for the issues at hand, however, is the influential essay, also first published in 1980, entitled "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," in which Hall discusses the import of the reception of structuralist approaches within Cultural Studies, which were at first "culturalist" in character (in the sense of a "culturalism" attributed to Raymond Williams and Edward P. Thompson). According to Hall, Williams' and Thompson's culturalism can be described as follows: "They have a particular way of understanding the totality – though it is with a small 't,' concrete and historically determinate, uneven in its correspondences. They understand it 'expressively.' And since they constantly inflect the more traditional analysis towards the experiential level, or read the other structures and relations downwards from the vantage point of how they are 'lived,' they are properly (even if not adequately or fully) characterized as

'culturalist' in their emphasis [...]."[12] A structuralist analytic design, in contrast, has three advantages, Hall writes: 1) It emphasizes the determinacy of conditions and thus not only opens up an understanding of the manner in which existing conditions form and constitute subjective practices, but also rejects "a naive humanism, with its necessary consequence: a voluntarist and populist political practice."[13] 2) In contradistinction to the "complex simplicity" of the culturalist notion of an "expressive totality" founded on an abstract idea of human activity as such, structuralism permits to think a structural unity that is "constructed through the differences between, rather than the homology of, practices."[14] 3) Finally, Hall sees a third strength of structuralism "in its decentering of 'experience' and in its seminal work in elaborating the neglected category of 'ideology'"; for the authentication performed by "experience" prevents culturalism from developing an adequate conception of ideology. [15]

Far be it from me to cast doubt on the essential cogency of these objections, inspired especially by a structuralism in the Althusserian mould, against a culturalist tendency, still in existence today, within Cultural Studies. Nonetheless, the trajectory of Hall's argument clearly displays a complete shift of focus to questions of the determinacy (or again overdetermination) of present conditions, of ideology, or of an alternative conception of "cultural totality," while his references to the categories of experience and expression remain purely negative. What is closed off, it would seem, is the possibility of understanding experience in a way that does not aim at a generalized authentication of human practices and enunciations, and yet insists on the inalienable singularity of experience, precisely examining, for instance, the determinacy of conditions as to how they "block" experience (Negt/Kluge). And

something similar obtains regarding the question of expression: rejecting the notion of an "expressive totality" does away altogether with the category of expression—or, in large areas of Cultural Studies, replaces it with the less suspicious term "articulation" (with the famous double sense of "expression" and "conjunction"), by virtue of which an expressive structure is quite patently drawn on but never discussed as such. At the same time, the nebulous category of "social reality" haunts Cultural Studies, unsettling them wherever they take their political commitments seriously.

III.

Let me not be misunderstood: in structuralist linguistic theory—and I do not think that there is a way to go back behind it—the relation between expression and that which is expressed (like that between signifier and signified) clearly presents as a *linguistic* problem. That which is expressed is never simply an extra-linguistic reality to which a certain linguistic expression would have been assigned; setting out from this sort of correlation, one would find it difficult to make sense of a phenomenon such as translation. This should not, on the other hand, lead one to conclude an all too general declaration of the type "everything is rendered language," which, by the way, is only rarely proffered as a theoretical statement, and much more often as reproach or imputation. The question is rather (and this question is of methodological and hence decisive importance, not least for any theoretical discourse) how the reference to any "extra-linguistic" social reality is manifest *within* linguistic enunciations.

Emile Benveniste has framed this question with precision, writing: "In the enunciation, language finds itself employed for the

expression of a certain relation to the world."[16] We ought to read this sentence closely; it does not say that "the world" is expressible in language. What is expressible (i.e., that which is expressed) is a *relation to the world* which, as it is expressed, assumes the form of a given linguistic fact. The problem of reference proper, that is to say, of *the relation that language itself maintains with the world*, is located by Benveniste not in the sphere of that which is expressed but in that of the centers of expression: "The presence of the speaker at his enunciation renders each instance of discourse constitutive of an internal center of reference."[17]

How is one to understand such a presence of the speaker in his or her enunciation, or such an inner reference? At this point, Benveniste stresses the role of the deictic ("indicating") terms, which had long been neglected by linguistics; especially of personal pronouns such as "I" and "you," but also of words such as "this," "here," "now," etc. The meaning of the word "I" cannot be determined lexicographically (one will find in lexicons at most a linguistic or meta-linguistic reflection on this word); it is strictly bound to the singular center of expression that utters this word at a specific point in time. Through the word "I," then, the "presence of the speaker at his enunciation" becomes manifest by virtue of which an "inner reference" is provided for, that is to say, the relation between the linguistic given and that "non-linguistic" "center of speech"—to be precise: a center not reducible to a linguistic given, and instead referring to a linguistic *capability*—which in the enunciation is not just expressed but expresses *itself*. "You," "this," "here," "there," "now," "tomorrow," etc. furthermore show the centers of expression to be dialogical and situated in a world, and at the same time open up possibilities of "co-reference" (Benveniste) that are at play in any communication.

In the end, then, with Benveniste, "social reality" would always have to be understood as the reality of a "speaking society,"[18] to use a felicitous phrase from Roland Barthes, instead of adding it on as an unclear supplemental category to a critical analysis primarily oriented by "codes," "textuality," or "representations." And that implies in no way a falling back into any kind of the naïve appeal to "authenticity" that Stuart Hall has rightly criticized. It means rather that one must rethink the complex relations between the singular social experiences in which speakers and their enunciations are situated and the concrete forms of expression, without reducing the latter prematurely—and in a totalizing approach—to ideological formations or counter-formations. The category of experience acts as "authenticator" only where its reference, always problematic, to the manner it is given expression remains disregarded; or, to put it differently, where that which is expressed in the expression is identified with the "inner reference" by virtue of which the centers of expression (speakers) appropriate speech and manifest themselves in this speech.

In the end, it is just such an identification, now from the side of that which is expressed, that those cultural and political theories fall prey to that persistently attempt to decipher, in encodings and textualities, a "grammar of culture"—if one enlivened by contradictory or conflicting practices—by correlating the "maps of meaning" and the "maps of social reality." In contrast, the remaining part of this essay will sketch a possible *diagrammatic* perspective. I take the concept of the "diagram" from a few works by Deleuze and Deleuze/Guattari, who in turn lift the term out of Foucault but discuss it in the context of a series of distinctions that stem from the Danish linguist, Louis Hjelmslev.[19]

In his *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*,[20] Hjelmslev had undercut the classical form-content distinction and complicated

the structuralist (de Saussurian) concept of the sign (signifier/signified) by further differentiating, from both a systematic and a processual perspective, the functives of "content" and "expression," whose "solidarity" in the first place allows for the sign function; distinguishing "content-form" and "expression-form" (as more precise names for the functives of the sign function), and "content-substance" (zones of "meaning") and "expression-substance" (discussed by Hjelmslev at first as phonetic zones, which however implies reference to the center constituted by the speaker). It can be regarded as Hjelmslev's decisive operation that he broke up the common distinction between form (signifier) and content (signified), locating the sign (language but also, as Hjelmslev shows toward the end of his *Prolegomena*, any other semiotic system) at the intersection between the form-substance distinction and that between content and expression.

This is not the place to discuss all the implications of Hjelmslev's theoretical operation. I shall limit myself to quoting a few central sentences from its conclusion: "The sign is [...]—paradoxical as it may seem—a sign for a content-substance and a sign for an expression-substance. It is in this sense that the sign can be said to be a sign for something. On the other hand, we see no justification for calling the sign a sign merely for the content-substance, or (what nobody has thought of, to be sure) merely for the expression-substance. The sign is a two-sided entity, with a Janus-like perspective in two directions, and with effect in two respects: 'outwards' toward the expression-substance and 'inwards' toward the content-substance.'"[21]

One of the central points of Hjelmslev's distinctions certainly lies in the fact that they introduce the expression-substance (or, in the terminology suggested here, the centers of expression) into the horizon of *what* signs stand *for*. With respect to this expression-

substance, even on the plane of phonetic analysis, "very nearly all the striate [i.e., voluntary] musculature"[22] participates in the performance of speaking (and can these bodily performances in the end be separated out from the entirety of physical performance, or physical existence?). Yet it is insufficient to engage only the phonetic plane: the expression-substance can be, in the case of written language, a "graphical substance," and there are other such "substances," e.g., "marine flag codes."[23] In the end, then, if we summarize these considerations, the concept of the expression-substance refers to the *physical existence of speakers in a meaning-structured historico-political world*. Now this existence is certainly subject to 'determinacies' of the most varied kind, yet these determinacies correspond to a *capability* that realizes itself in them and that, *in the expression*, can confirm or resist these determinacies. There's nothing "authentic" here, for bodily determinations continually inscribe themselves into these realizations, and preexisting structures of meaning perpetuate themselves in them. In Benveniste's terms: the *expressed* "relation to the world" never coincides with the relation to the world that, in language, is documented only by virtue of an "inner reference" which irreducibly refers to the *occurrence of language in a specific situation*. For this reason, however, it is indispensable to examine expression-forms not only for their complex correspondences with content-forms—and these, in turn, for their correspondences with content-substances—but also with regard to their complex correspondences with the respective expression-substances (or centers of expression).

With these considerations in mind, one will hardly be tempted to essay to decipher a grammar of "culture" or of "cultural relations" from the forms of expression of our times; nor will one simply and without further consideration locate the emancipatory perspectives

of the present in a process of "cultural translation." Much rather, one would have to examine a *diagrammatics of culturalization* that, on the one hand, immediately affects the bodies of speakers (with the force of border regimes, labor regimes, security regimes, the configuration or suppression of spaces of social exchange, etc.) and, on the other hand, insistently attempts to pin these speakers' articulations down as expressions of "their culture," or in any case, as "cultural" expression. A single example: Can we in good earnest speak of something like the "Islamization," as a "cultural" phenomenon, of countries such as Pakistan, without taking, for instance, the fact into account that the spread of Islamic schools (*madâris*) stands in a relation of correspondence to an education budget of only 1.8% of the Pakistani GDP (and hence, the decay of the public education system), while, in times of dictatorship and of the international "War on Terror" (whose logic, in turn, falsely identifies these Islamic schools as "breeding-places of terror"), military and security expenses soar to heights undreamt of? [24]

It is this kind of diagrammatics that, difficult as that may seem today, one would have to analyze; and if the stakes of translation—as well as, incidentally, its limits—lie in finding "other, alternative signs" (Jakobson), what would be called for today would first and foremost be to liberate, again, these signs from their colonization by "culture."

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[1] Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, *Word and Language* (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1971), 261.

[2] Jakobson's example for increased explicitness is the intra-linguistic translation of the English *bachelor* (denoting marital status, but also an academic degree) into *unmarried man*.

[3] This debate has been documented in M. Nussbaum with Respondents, *For the Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); for Butler's contribution, "Universality in Culture," see pp. 45–52. For a critical discussion of this debate cf. also Boris Buden, *Der Schacht von Babel. Ist Kultur übersetzbar?* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2005), 171–176.

[4] Butler, loc.cit., 45.

[5] Ibid., 46.

[6] Ibid., 48.

[7] Ibid., 49 ff.

[8] It is pointless to object that such articulations stand in no relation to the "universal." Let it suffice here to recollect, with Etienne Balibar, that racism (although the problem is not exclusive to the political right) is also a universalism.

[9] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), 23.

[10] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, P. A. Treichler (London, New York: Routledge, 1992), 277–286, quote p. 284.

[11] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. S. During (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 90–103, quote p. 98.

[12] Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” http://xroads.virginia.edu/~drbr/hall.html (May 2006).

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Emile Benveniste, “L’appareil formel de l’énonciation,” in *Problèmes de linguistique générale 2* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 79–88, quote p. 82.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Roland Barthes, “Pourquoi j’aime Benveniste,” in *Le bruissement de la langue. Essais critiques IV* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1984), 194.

[19] Cf. e.g. Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 34ff. and 72ff; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. By Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 43ff., 111f., and 530 n. 39; and Félix Guattari, “Hjelmslev and Immanence,” in *The Anti-Œdipus Papers*, trans. Kélina Gotman (New York, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), 201–223. I am indebted to Klaus Neundlinger for valuable advice.

[20] Cf. Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), especially 47–60.

[21] Ibid., 58.

[22] Ibid., 103; Hjelmslev here refers to a study by E. and K. Zwirner.

[23] Cf. ibid., 103 f.

[24] Cf. William Dalrymple, “Voyage à l’intérieur des madrasa pakistanaises,” *Le monde diplomatique*, March 2006, 4f.