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The General Desemantisation: Global Language and Hegemony

Traduire le silence de la plebe

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Yesterday, as I was listening to Boris Buden[1], another possible title came to me for my paper: “How to untranslate”. I would like to carry on the programme of unfaithfulness in translation. I thought of all those cultural and social *malentendus*, misunderstandings, which happen when you face one cultural code from another. We all know that this happens also within one and the same culture. It has been my claim in my work on translation in *Transeuropéennes* (n° 22, “Traduire, entre les cultures”) and elsewhere, that language is translation in the first place, a translation insideout and vice versa, and that my mother tongue is translation. We opposed the concept of translation in a contextual sense to the concept of “dialogue des cultures” which takes “cultures” as closed and naturalized communities, possibly from the standpoint of *francophonie* (to which I am critical though I am francophone, but that is not my topic today). But I shall also be referring to textual translation inevitably. I started my career as a translator from Sanskrit, Pali, and from some living languages. I was reminded of a joke, maybe half-racist, but I think also self-

derisory, which was circulating in the former Yugoslavia, where we had a lot of students from non-aligned and third world countries, in particular from Africa. I had such friends at University. Some had come on scholarships or exchange programmes, others (the Algerians) often as wounded in the war, others (Chileans) as refugees. The joke, claiming to proceed from the point of view of an African, goes something like this: "Europeans are those people who can be counted (in numbers; possibly, also those who count, who have a say). For that, you must have a European education. I gave my daughter good education, she can speak very good "Europe"." It may not be so funny as a joke, but it does say something about "lost in translation".

Salman Rushdie reminds us in *Shame*, where he has good observations on language and translation, that translation means to be "borne across" (*trans-latio*). Carried across, or transferred. Such a concept of course applies to people in their contexts, not to mere texts, though texts are an important metaphor (again – "carrying across") for the sense in which we mean translation here. In being borne across there is an unwittingly postulated element of passivity, to which I would like to return some time. In this first round here, I would like to take "passivity" as understanding the limits of both sovereignty and autonomy; or I take it to mean interdependence. It is also *karma*. *Karma* is not fate, or destiny, as it is taken in common English. On the contrary, it is a rich philosophical concept meaning shared responsibility in an interpersonal, social, generational and even interspecies sense – the solidarity of all forms of life. In this sense, karma doesn't merely stick to one, but it sticks to all others around us too, and is contagious in a deep and complex way. What happens when the circumstances from which, with which, you are translated, are tragedy, a context of misery or defeat, or if your neighbour's conditions are those of desolation

though you still imagine yourself happy? There is a complex domino effect here. Do we carry along with ourselves the conditions of disaster and misfortune we are born and borne into, or can we get loose of those? I would say that this is grasped in a masterly way at times by writers, in fiction. The examples are many, I could take Gabriel Garcia Marquez for *Cien años de solitud*, or Orhan Pamuk for *Snow*, or Coetzee for his many books, for example for *Boyhood, Youth*, or especially *Disgrace*, and others. I am not proposing fatalism here: we are of course carried down, we are knocked down, we are disgraced with others around us when they are humiliated. We can be knocked down by history or by political defeat, and this applies to whole populations, not only individuals. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has a consideration of this phenomenon – "what can we learn from a fall" – with regard to colonialism. I think, however, that this is general question applying not only to colonialism, where it is obvious; but true also of all other situations, inter-personal, social, political. It also applies to the way we consider and are incapable of facing death.

Semantic difficulties appear as soon as words are expected to express the symbolic, and also as soon as they need to translate a non-recognised suffering. Words do not always denote what they are supposed or expected to mean. A general *desemantisation* is not only part of the new international political situation with generalised terror and unheard of violence, but it is at its core and its source. The desemantisation is the sign or symptom of the political and of heterogeneity – hushed to silence and repressed. The state, to take its example, will hammer its statute and status to be recognized by others, and will not translate or take into account the demands of the people. The rival is ethnicized, called a terrorist, which legitimates excessive violence against it. Desemantisation is a condition and a technology of power in the

new topography of deterritorialized terror (i.e. of terror that can catch you anywhere) but also of many territorialized statuses. We need to be aware of the pernicious and carefully staged process of desemantisation going along with depoliticisation. *There are no more alternative or competing state sovereignties, and thus no alternative meanings*. Dictated meanings and mono-semic "significations" are a sign of a world with Absolute Sense. A new type of planetary totalitarianism, starting from language or deeply rooted in it comes with it. Victims need first to be made wordless – and thus inexistent – in order to be killed. Language (or its impediment) is at the clue for violence. This is why, alas, violence is not the opposite of culture. But putting it in words, creating a public sphere of verbal exchange and negotiation of translation helps neutralise or decrease physical violence, however fragile and inconsistent the concept of public space itself. Keeping meanings fluid, non-fixed, and language polysemic - helps defusing violence. It is important to go against the stream of conventional and received meaning or understanding given by the establishment. Or to develop some political imagination, again, by putting it into words.

Political imagination

C*onsciousness is often belated, and received history may mask the many alternative histories.* The *displacemen*t / *being out of place*, or *(e)migration,* being *stateless,* which is a general human condition but so palpable in situations of partitions and wars, was recognised by the Balkans only when it happened there – i.e. 50 years after the South Asian example of the famous partition of India, in spite of the former non-aligned ideology. *No-one else's life can feel as real as our own*. But various contemporary nationalisms, fundamentalisms rely on (post-)colonial discourses of other times, and trick their

public. A narration is linked to a space, or "translates a space into a place", *utopia* into *topos*. Non-aligned citizens had no narrative field for the concept of "partition" until its meaning fell on them as their own experience through "their" own *bodies, territory*, translated as culture and identity. It is in a way *when it lost a territory (the Yugoslav space) and its referent other, its « good » other, the "non-aligned"*, that the non-nationalist opposition in the former Yugoslavia earned itself a narrative field for post-colonial imagination. This is the "between" which is there. It is a spacing (*écart*) between a situation and its translation. In other words, the question of time is introduced. When we visualise the time dimension, we can see immediately how translation is negotiation, political talks, *pourparlers,* the use of which is to defuse (*désamorcer*; to deconstruct) violence of which there is no such thing as a zero degree (because, as Balibar has it, violence can at best be civilized).

I was invited to a conference on post-colonial studies and cultural studies in general applied to Central and Eastern Europe in Vienna two years ago. In many places in the former Yugoslavia, especially in feminist circles, post-colonial studies are now the framework for thinking gender and other social and political plasticities. Now, I have written elsewhere about the peregrinations of postcolonial studies and subaltern studies around the world, and of the way languages are involved and performative in this. I have also written about the difference between a global language (carrying a specific hegemony) such as English, and a non-global one, as French, within the colonial and post-colonial context. There is no semantic field for that in France for obvious reasons, or it is only painfully being open now. So I have no response whatsoever to that elaboration, even on the part of close friends and colleagues I have been working with. But I am here interested in the shift of a

narrative, imaginative and semantic field operated in such cases. All of a sudden, we go global through and with cultural and postcolonial studies and we apply them to the Balkans or to Central Europe, or indeed to French society etc. We recognize or we think we recognize patterns, at the same time as we apply the same reading grid to comparable yet different situations. What is happening in such cases is a double-way and double-edged enterprise in the course of translating theory. I could also call this paper "Translated theories" There is an erasure *and* there is also a reshuffling, or reconstruction, together with the shift, of cultural memory. In this double-way movement of exportation or of transportation of theory, there is a double depoliticisation (about the latter, my paper on terrorism) and de- re-semantisation, one before, one after. I believe these are also attempts at dealing with the disgrace, or the *karma*, that presses us down.

The post-colonial text, used by updated cultural studies scholars even in the Balkans, is now the deviation of "our" own unconscious. There is a paradox here, since the strategy of anti-colonial and anti-imperial resistance is structured by the wish to reshuffle the relationship to the other through a *translation* of the past or of the unconscious into a new *common* narrative field, yet avoiding binaries; which also means reconstructing the hegemony as all the players in the game are being replaced. But whose past are we dealing with at all in such displacements? As postcolonial rhetoric recently becomes the blueprint for understanding society in the Balkans for example, and I admit it is useful, I wonder where has disappeared all the non-aligned science and grid, the disposition by the state (former Yugoslavia) but also translated into social, educational, cultural realities that made me choose to study Indian studies; the disposition by which the first collected edition of *El Moujahid* (the Algerian FLN resistance paper) was published

in Yugoslavia in 1961, that gave us Frantz Fanon read and translated in real time, the *négritude* authors studied in school and at universities, as well as all African leaders' political books translated, that produced a generation of girls called Indira in Yugoslavia (not at the time when Indira Gandhi was in power and had introduced emergency, but before, as her father Jawaharlal Nehru was the beloved non-aligned leader and his *Discovery of India* was published). I remember when, in the early seventies, as a well known German feminist scholar had asked us contributions for a collective book and proposed to bundle us up in the Eastern block section, we asked to be put into the part concerned with the Third World. This is where we saw ourselves then. Yes, someone else's *karma* can stick to you in different ways. I am not suggesting here that non-alignment can be restored, nor am I mourning it. I am saying that we may be able to learn something from that experience, since it had been translated into social practices over a long span of time, as well as from its failure and defeat.

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[1] Boris Buden: Translation: The Mother Tongue of a Future Society?, Maison de l'Europe de Paris, 12 October 2006