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Translation, Interpretation and Intercultural Communication

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ABSTRACT

Recent trends in Translation Studies advocate a focus on translation as a form of intercultural communication. Yet in some cases there seems to be a lack of awareness as regards the theoretical problems involved in every cultural approach to translation. The aim of this article is to highlight some aspects of these problems by bringing to the fore the interconnections between the question of translation and the general issue of culture. More specifically, the emphasis will be put on the interpretive dimension of translation and the peculiarities of the translator's interpretive moves within different worlds of significations. The approach outlined here draws on insights from the works of Clifford Geertz, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Cornelius Castoriadis, and the conclusions to be reached will inevitably point to the rejection of some deep-seated metaphors about translation, such as the meaning transfer metaphor.

KEYWORDS

Thick description, webs of significance, imaginary institution of society, text world, intertextuality.

1. Introduction

Ever since the emergence of Translation Studies as a distinct discipline, theorising about translation has been expanded in unprecedented ways. But this expansion has brought with itself a multitude of different and competing approaches, translation models etc. That is of course part of the overall attempt to consolidate an identity for the newborn discipline and establish a dominant paradigm. In the course of consolidating its identity, Translation Studies has gone through a period of radical change and fragmentation (Baker 1996: 9). In this context there occurred what is commonly known as the cultural turn in Translation Studies (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990: 4).

The cultural turn in Translation Studies refers actually to a specific trend that sought to be the dominant paradigm, and initially presented itself as an anti-linguistic paradigm (Koskinen 2004: 150). However, this re-orientation cannot be accounted for solely in terms of the opposition between these two approaches. Rather, it "can be seen as part of a cultural turn that was taking place in the humanities generally in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and has altered the shape of many traditional subjects" (Bassnett 2007: 16). For Juliane House, however, the relation between the two trends is one of mimicking. More precisely, she argues

that in this case Translation Studies is "simply following a general trend in the humanities and the social sciences," and in this respect "Translation Studies' history of mimicking fashionable trends is here […] simply replayed" (2002: 92). On the other hand, Mona Baker claims that

> the reason this new approach can be set in opposition to linguistically-derived models […] is that cultural studies is not just about giving primacy to cultural issues as such. One of the main features of cultural studies […] is to add a strong political dimension to whatever happens to be the subject of study. (1996: 13)

It would seem wrong then to assume that the ever-growing concern about cultural phenomena in Translation Studies has only to do with advances in the methodologies of the discipline, since questions of power are involved too. But it is true that research in translation has already created new paths, and a more or less explicit focus on the cultural aspects of translation is now shared by almost every modern approach. It is also true, however, that despite appearances there is no consensus as regards the way in which these cultural aspects are to be conceived of. This of course is not surprising, given the considerable number of unsettled debates about culture, still besetting the humanities and the social sciences, which inevitably carry over—to a greater or lesser extent – to Translation Studies. A closer look at this point reveals that the problem lies not in a lack of consensus but in a lack of awareness of the deeper theoretical difficulties involved in accounting for the cultural aspects of translation. In order to highlight some of these difficulties and to foreground the intricate interrelationship between the question of translation and the general issue of culture, an attempt will be made to outline a conception of translation as intercultural communication that draws on certain considerations concerning the nature of culture and the institution of society.

More specifically, we will take as a starting point a certain conception of culture along with the particular view on human nature that it brings with itself. Next, we will expand some aspects of this conception towards two interconnected directions: the emergence of the hermeneutical phenomenon and the constitution of human societies as worlds of significations. The account to be offered will provide the perspective from which we will attempt to shed some light on the intercultural dimension of translation, by focusing mainly on the translator's interpretive task. In that way, some of the major problems involved in theorising about the cultural aspects of translation will be brought to the fore in concrete terms, followed by an outline of a general approach to the questions raised in the course of such a theoretical endeavour.

2. Webs of Significance

Culture is a deceptively transparent concept. Ever since its first anthropological definition by Edward Tylor (1903: 1) it has acquired an extremely diversified content. Suffice it to say that by the 1950s there were already more than 200 definitions (Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952). As Raymond Williams aptly put it,

> [Culture] is the one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines, and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought. (1988: 87)

In effect, the polysemy of the term reveals a spectrum of competing approaches to social phenomena. In that sense, espousing a certain conception of culture may have broader implications concerning the overall perspective to be adopted.

In the present article an account will be offered that foregrounds the crucial role of meaning in social life. To this end, a suitable point of departure would be the conception of culture formulated by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz:

> Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (1993: 5)

Here Geertz moves towards a specialised definition which can provide a theoretically more powerful concept of culture (1993: 4). From this point of view, human behaviour is seen as symbolic action and thus the question of its ontological status is overshadowed by that of its social import (1993: 10). Accordingly,

> culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns – customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters—as has, by and large, been the case up to now, but as a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call "programs") —for the governing of behavior. (Geertz 1993: 44)

Taking culture as a set of such mechanisms might sound as if reducing it to a mere epiphenomenon of human life. However, Geertz emphatically contends that "man is precisely the animal most desperately dependent upon such extragenetic, outside-the-skin control mechanisms, such cultural programs, for ordering his behavior" (1993: 44), and concludes that culture "is not just an ornament of human existence but – the principal basis of its specificity—an essential condition of it" (1993: 46). Of

course, special attention should be given not to lose sight of the institutional nature of rules, if one does not want to be caught in the trap of the so-called "fallacies of the rule" (for an account of this type of fallacy see Bourdieu 1977: 22-30).

It is evident that this semiotic approach to culture is intertwined with an essentially cultural conception of human nature. It should be noted, however, that when Geertz stresses the vital role of culture in human life, he is referring precisely to that mosaic of different cultures in human society. The emphasis on cultural diversity is clear: "We are, in sum, incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture—and not through culture in general but through highly particular forms of it" (Geertz 1993: 49). Geertz tries to keep the analysis of these forms as closely to concrete social events as possible, by focusing on "small, but densely textured facts" (1993: 28) wherein lies the real object of ethnography: namely, a "stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures" (1993: 7). From a Geertzean point of view, then, ethnography is seen as *thick description* (1993: 9-10).

Thick description is a notion introduced by Gilbert Ryle in his essays *Thinking and Reflecting* and *The Thinking of Thoughts*. The term appears first to designate a certain kind of description of activities displaying the feature of intention-parasitism (Ryle 2009a: 489); that is, the performance of this type of activities is dependent upon the intention of performing an activity of some other type. This kind of description requires reference to the intended or expected actions. In *The Thinking of Thoughts* a somewhat more detailed analysis of the notion of thick description is given. Ryle there makes up a story about two boys who appear, at a first level of description, to do exactly the same thing: they swiftly contract the eyelids of their right eyes. In the first boy, Ryle says,

> that is only an involuntary twitch; but the other is winking conspiratorially to an accomplice. At the lowest or the thinnest level of description the two contractions of the eyelids may be exactly alike […] Yet there remains the immense but unphotographable difference between a twitch and a wink. (2009b: 494)

The immense difference between a twitch and a wink is that a wink is a *meaningful action*, whereas a twitch is obviously not. More specifically, in a wink one can identify a set of success-versus-failure conditions, a certain intention, a message to be imparted to a particular recipient, and a code that allows for the production and interpretation of that message (Ryle 2009b: 495). Thick description refers precisely to these layers, to this stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures that can be found in every fact of social life. It is the kind of description that aims at "sorting out the structures of signification" (Geertz 1993: 9) inherent in social events. It should be noted, however, that such a process of sorting out the structures of signification does not remain unaffected by the personal involvement of the interpreting subject in the act of describing. Rather,

the socio-culturally determined horizon of the interpreter plays a significant role in the constitution of thick description as an act of interpretation.

What the notion of thick description primarily underscores is the extremely dense structure of social events. In relatively familiar situations, the thick texture of social activity passes frequently unnoticed to the participants in a communication event, due to the fact that in these cases the sharing of common forms of life and of the practical knowledge of familiar language-games makes communication seem rather unproblematic. But even among members of the same cultural group communication problems are very likely to occur, and whenever this happens the thick texture of social events is 'felt' by the interlocutors in their attempt to reach understanding or, at any rate, to fulfil their particular goals. In the case of ethnographers and translators, the notion of thick description can serve as a useful Wittgensteinian "object of comparison" for conceptualising the interpretive task involved in the respective instances of intercultural communication. Thick description, as a "process of sorting out structures of signification," denotes the attempt of the individual to understand other people's acts and discourses that are rooted in a web of various forms of life. As noted above, it is a task always performed from within a specific, socio-culturally determined horizon; thus it can be said that the observer's standpoint has indeed a role to play in the very shaping of the structures of signification of a social event, taken as an observable object to be understood. But in order to clarify this point, we need to take a closer look at the question of the constitution of worldviews.

3. Worldviews

Seeing culture as webs of significance may have crucial consequences for the conception of the human condition. As shown before, in Geertz's case the semiotic approach to culture is intertwined with an essentially cultural conception of human nature. Furthermore, such an approach to culture presupposes the adoption of a certain theoretical stance towards the question of the constitution of the human world. The connection between the two will become apparent if we turn for a moment to the work of Cornelius Castoriadis.

The Greek thinker takes culture as "everything, in the institution of a society, that goes beyond its ensemblistic-identitary (functional-instrumental) dimension and that the individuals of this society positively cathect as 'value' in the largest sense of the term: in short the Greeks' *paideia*" (1993: 301-302). According to Castoriadis, the values of society

> are not given by an external instance, nor are they discovered by society in natural deposits or in the heaven of Reason. They are, each time, created by the given society as kernels of its institution, ultimate and irreducible bearings for

> significance, orientation points for social making/doing and representing (1993: 302).

No doubt, these "orientation points" bring to mind the Geertzean "control mechanisms." But in Castoriadis an emphasis is put on the instituted aspect of culture, and its crucial role for human activity (for "social making/doing and representing") is explicitly stated. In this case the question of culture is directly connected with the crucial question of the institution of society. And what seems to hold together these two is the inexpungibly meaningful aspect of social reality. In fact, Castoriadis contends that the

> institution of society is in each case the institution of a magma of social imaginary significations, which we can and must call a *world* of significations […] Society brings into being a world of significations and itself exists in reference to such a world. Correlatively, nothing can exist for society if it is not related to the world of significations; everything that appears is immediately caught up in this world – and can even come to appear only by being caught up in this world (1987: 359).

The insights drawn from Geertz's interpretive anthropology and the work of Cornelius Castoriadis bring to the fore the constitutive role of culture and its significance for the institution of society. Culture is not to be seen as an adjunct of human life with which one could dispense at will. It is neither a set of spatiotemporally differentiated adjustments to human behaviour. Culture is that particular light cast upon the magma of social significations, by means of which the human beings are constituted as social beings and acquire a world of a unique kind. It is indeed a web, as Geertz conceived of it, in the sense that it presents itself not as a monolithic structure, a unique and unalterable orientation point, but as a flow of significations that are each time concretised in social activity. It is in this sense that the human world, as world of social beings, is of a unique kind. In Gadamer this uniqueness is expressed in terms of a "freedom from environment" that characterises our relationship to the world, and this freedom "implies the linguistic constitution of the world" (2004: 441). Along similar lines, Boris Cyrulnik described the constitution of the human world in terms of human beings' escaping the immediate constraints of sensory impressions and stimuli, thus acquiring additional "degrees of freedom" in respect to their physical environment (1995: 100). The verbal nature of the human world implies a multiplicity of worldviews. These worldviews, however, are not to be conceived of as partial aspects of a world-in-itself. Each worldview purports to be *the* world-in-itself, thus presenting itself as a complete whole. Yet the plurality of worldviews does not amount to a cluster of mutually exclusive worlds. Rather, "the world is not different from the views in which it presents itself" (Gadamer 2004: 444). The different worldviews, therefore, constitute the various linguistic shadings of the world, and

> in the case of the shadings of verbal worldviews, each one potentially contains every other one within it – i.e., each worldview can be extended into every other. It

> can understand and comprehend, from within itself, the 'view' of the world presented in another language. (Gadamer 2004: 445)

These remarks point to a conception of cultural and linguistic diversity not in terms of closed systems and barriers, but on the basis of the potentiality of understanding different worldviews. And this, as it will be seen, has significant consequences for the conception of translation as intercultural communication.

4. Translation and Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is generally "conceptualized as communication between people from different national cultures, and many scholars limit it to face-to-face communication" (Gudykunst 2002: 179). This straightforward approach is nonetheless of little help in itself, unless it is coupled with a concrete conception of culture. Defining intercultural communication as "communication between people from different cultures" is rather a preliminary move which opens a range of possibilities for dealing with the social phenomenon under discussion. A further range of possibilities is available, as far as the intercultural dimension of translation is concerned.

For the purposes of the present article, intercultural communication cannot be limited to face-to-face communication, since in that way the translation of written texts is excluded from the discussion. But apart from the question of translation, such a limitation is in any case unacceptable unless the specific objective of the research calls for it. For intercultural communication displays a further and equally important dimension that concerns the creation and interpretation of texts (here the term is taken in its broadest sense, covering both verbal and non-verbal semiotic systems). In this respect, it also relates to the question of intertextuality. The dimension of intercultural communication that concerns textual and intertextual phenomena is of crucial importance for the question of translation. Thus, in what follows an attempt will be made to outline an approach to translation in terms of textual interpretation.

A trivial reason for the proposed focus is that, by definition, translation concerns texts. But there are deeper reasons as well that have to do with the importance of the hermeneutic phenomenon for the whole of social life. For interpreting is not something one can refrain from at will. Rather,

> the way we experience one another, the way we experience historical tradition, the way we experience the mutual givenness of our existence and of our world, constitute a truly hermeneutic universe, in which we are not imprisoned, as if behind insurmountable barriers, but to which we are opened. (Gadamer 2004: xxii)

Nor interpretation amounts to a mere reproductive process. But in order to clarify this point, a closer look at the nature of texts is needed.

In ordinary language, the term text is usually associated with the production of written discourse. However, in a number of disciplines (such as film studies, kinesics, music semiotics, etc.) it has been used in an extended sense covering different semiotic systems. It is precisely in this sense that the term is employed here. But it should be made clear from the start that this broad conception of textuality does not imply that the structural rules governing written discourse apply indiscriminatively to any other semiotic system. Rather, the point here is simply to underscore the fact that signs are not used only in the broad context of a particular social situation, but in a micro-context as well, this latter being fabricated with the material provided by the specific semiotic system(s) in use. Using signs is a social activity of creating meaningful wholes in which part of the potential of various semiotic systems is substantiated. The term text could generally be taken to designate these semiotic constructs, which—one might say, alluding to the etymology of the term—are woven from threads taken from the webs of significance that society constantly creates. In this conception, of course, intertextual phenomena should be taken into consideration, since every text is not to be conceived of as a "self-contained structure but as differential and historical" (Frow 1990: 45). In other words, no text is conceivable apart from an intricate network of other texts and discursive practices, and thus intertextuality "is less a name for a work's relation to particular prior texts than an assertion of a work's participation in a discursive space and its relation to the codes which are the potential formalization of that space" (Culler 1976: 1382).

One aspect of textuality, then, is the dense texture and the intertextual nature of texts. The other aspect concerns their mode of being in society. Acknowledging the indisputable fact that every text is produced in a given social context still leaves the question of its constitution open. For there can be no text as such apart from its interpretation. Its very production is performed along lines in part determined by certain interpretive practices. Umberto Eco expressed this idea in terms of a model of the possible reader that the author has to foresee (1979). But every text is potentially extensible to spatiotemporally different social realities, because not "just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author" (Gadamer 2004: 296). As a meaningful whole then, the text is each time co-constituted through the interpretive act. This, nevertheless, is not a constitution *ex nihilo*. Texts bring with themselves a world of significations that reveals itself as such only in an interpretive process.

Interpretation, on the other hand, occurs only within a certain tradition that allows for some possibilities and rules out other. Here tradition is not to be taken as an inert entity, since "in tradition there is always an element of freedom and of history itself. Even the most genuine and pure

tradition does not persist because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated" (Gadamer 2004: 282). Each tradition does not impose a unique and unchangeable horizon to those living in it. For every horizon is not "simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evaluation of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves" (Gadamer 2004: 293). What we do find, then, in a culture is not a particular closed horizon, but a multiplicity of horizons into which we move and that move with us (Gadamer 2004: 303).

The incessant transformation of horizons is of particular importance for the conception of translation as an act of intercultural communication. For, on the one hand, it reveals much about the translator's interpretive activity and the nature of the kind of meaning-assignment involved. On the other hand, it corroborates from a different perspective the crucial role of translation in cultural change. It is true that interpretation is always performed within the personal horizon of the interpreter. This, of course, does not mean that it should or can be accounted for in terms of the interpreter's individuality alone. For one's horizon is not totally under one's control, but is always affected by socio-historical and cultural forces (Garrett 1978: 393). Gadamer defines horizons in terms of prejudices (2004: 304-305). Prejudices, for Gadamer,

> are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us. (1976: 9)

The ever-changing nature of horizons actually means that "we are continually having to test all our prejudices" (Gadamer 2004: 305). The possibility of understanding rests, then, not only on a set of pre-commitments but also on reshaping these pre-commitments. An important part of this reshaping occurs, according to Gadamer, in encountering the past. An equally important part of this also occurs in encountering different contemporary cultures.

In the light of these and earlier remarks it becomes evident that conceiving of cultures as separate, closed, and homogeneous worlds is totally misleading. It may lead, among other things, to an axiologically marked conception of cultural differences as threats or at least as insurmountable barriers. To be sure, cultural differences can indeed be taken as obstacles from the perspective of the participants in a given instance of intercultural communication and in relation to the specific goals that both sides seek each time to achieve. At a descriptive level, however, such an *a priori* axiologically marked conception is not justified. In any case, the barrier analogy is inappropriate not only because of its

potential axiological load, but also for the very idea of exchange that it implies. Conceiving of human communication in terms of exchanging (ideas, values, etc.) offers a distorted picture of social relationships. For it presupposes the existence of individuals that enter in a dialogue with a set of pre-configured ideas, meanings etc. to be exchanged. Dialogue, in this sense, is mere trading and plays no significant role in the constitution of these mental products. When communication breaks down, this is supposedly due to various kinds of differences that hinder the exchange that takes place, and thus these differences are seen as barriers impeding the flow of mental products from one individual to the other.

At first sight, one could argue, that appears to be the case with translation. Its essential presupposition—the existence of different languages and cultures—sets a communicational space which seems to be full of barriers, some of them being—temporarily or permanently—insurmountable. In adopting such a view, one runs the risk of overlooking not only the fact that the existence of different languages and cultures constitutes the necessary condition of translation, but also that the various linguistic and cultural differences make translation possible as a meaning-assignment. It is true that every translated text acquires its meaning in virtue of a pre-existed text; but this is so not in the trivial sense of a meaning transfer. Rather, every translated text is constituted as a meaningful whole because first of all the translator moves towards a different sphere of social significations. In order to accomplish such an achievement, the translator needs to exploit in any conceivable way the potential of the source and the target culture in an attempt to understand new language-games and to shed light on new forms of life. Furthermore, the intertextual nature of texts implies that in a given act of translation various elements pertaining to cultures other than the source and the target culture may be essentially involved. Thus, the translator's interpretive moves are always performed in a space formed by the interplay of different worldviews.

These considerations indicate that it is quite reasonable to seek a conception of translation that no longer rests upon the barrier metaphor. However, dispensing with this analogy might seem as if suggesting that there are no difficulties whatsoever in the translation process. To anticipate possible objections of this sort, it should be made clear that these critical remarks concern the specific approach to communication outlined above in terms of exchanging pre-configured ideas, meanings etc. Rejecting, therefore, such an approach opens the possibility for a conception of translation that not only takes into account the various kinds of difficulties involved, but that also seeks to throw a different light on them and account for the *sui generis* character of the interpretive act inherent in every translation process. And it is precisely this interpretive dimension that provides Ariadne's clew to the labyrinths of the phenomenon of translation.

Translation is a language-game (Wittgenstein 1967: §23) and as such it is first and foremost determined by the linguisticality of the human world. It is true that we "can never get outside of language, but our mobility within language is limitless" (Castoriadis 1987: 126), thus allowing us to approach different worldviews and try to understand them. Translation is possible because it is a language-game. And what translation has in common with other language-games is its meaning-assigning aspect. The fact that human beings live in a world of significations presupposes an incessant meaning-making activity, which gives rise to a hermeneutic universe. The phenomenon of translation is conceivable precisely in relation to this universe.

5. Translation and Thick Description

It is generally assumed that the translator's interpretive task concerns texts. But in order to understand a text, one has to understand the language-games involved and the relevant forms of life. Each text, then, reveals itself as a gate to a world of significations. It could be said that interpreting a text has, in a certain respect, the character of a thick description. For texts present themselves as encompassing a hierarchy of meaningful structures, and thus textual interpretation inevitably involves sorting out these structures of signification. In this sense, translation too could be taken as a thick description. But in this case one should rather speak of a *sui generis* thick description.

The translator is, each time, confronted with a different text world, a densely textured semiotic construct articulated on a multilayered pattern and interrelated with other texts (not exclusively of verbal nature). A text is, therefore, not a self-contained structure but rather a node where heterogeneous threads of significance intertwine with each other in particular ways, thus constituting a meaningful whole. While striving to interpret and understand the source text, the translator is already in the semiotic universe of the source culture. But in order to create the target text, he or she needs to exploit the semiotic potential of the target language, and this inevitably leads to parallel interpretive moves within the target culture. The particularities of the source text force the translator to reconsider – and possibly to alter radically – not only some of his or her prejudices concerning the source culture, but also some of those concerning the target culture as well. Therefore, the kind of thick description involved in the process of translation is simultaneously directed – albeit to a different extent – to both the source and the target culture. A further peculiarity of the kind of thick description under discussion is that it is latent in the act of translation. In other words, although translation undoubtedly rests on this sort of double thick

description, its objective is not to produce a descriptive discourse but to re-create the text world of the source text in a different language. For this reason, the thick description involved in translation remains always invisible, and it can be partially revealed through the contrastive analysis of the source and the target text. In this sense, *if* translation is to be taken as a kind of thick description, then it should be treated as a *sui generis* thick description.

Of course, one might think that the preceding analysis is too theoretical, in the (pejorative) sense that it distorts or even ignores empirical facts and treats the phenomenon of translation in highly abstract terms. To be sure, there is always the danger of distorting a given phenomenon under study, especially in a rapidly expanding discipline such as Translation Studies. But in this case distortion can equally occur through empirical research. In any case, as regards the main theses of the present article concerning the interpretive aspects of translation, a few brief examples from the translation of ancient Greek terms might be of some use. (The practice of citing translation examples that are limited to the lexical level may, understandably, raise some suspicion about its explanatory efficiency, but in what follows it will be immediately seen that the cases cited refer to densely textured concepts.)

In an interesting article concerning the application of the concept of thick description in academic discourse about translation, Theo Hermans discusses the problems involved in the translation of the word *φιλία* [*philia*] in Aristotle's *Poetics* (2003: 380-382). An equally troubling term is πόλις [*polis*]. A great part of the difficulties involved in translating this term in a modern language rests on the fact that the relevant decisions to be made presuppose, at a first level, a certain conception of the ancient Greek democracy and its relationship to the modern forms of democracy (it could be also argued that similar problems beset the translation of the term *democracy* itself). At a deeper level, however, the translator's choices are undoubtedly affected by considerations concerning the social reality of the ancient Greek democracies, or even the ancient Greek world in general. Needless to say, these considerations are each time shaped, maintained, and altered in a given cultural context. Naturally, every horizon is – to a greater or lesser extent – in a state of perpetual change and allows for a more or less wide range of different conceptions. Thus, according to Castoriadis, for instance, the concept of polis is not to be confused with the modern concept of State; in his view, between the two there lies a vast chasm epigrammatically described in the following words: "What, in antiquity, is suspended over everything else is the idea that the law is us, that the *polis* is us. Ruling over everything else, in modern times, is the idea that the State is Them" (1997: 94-95).

Castoriadis' conception of the Greek polis (a detailed exposition of which can be found in *Ce qui fait la Grèce, 2. La Cité et les lois*) informs not only

the translation of the term under discussion but constitutes the essence of the basic interpretive scheme that underlies the translational approach to such key texts as the Funeral Oration of Thucydides. For example, in Pericles' famous statement "*Φιλοκαλοῦμέν τε γὰρ μετ' εὐτελείας καὶ φιλοσοφοῦμεν ἀνευ μαλακίας*" [*philokaloumen te gar met' euteleias kai philosophoumen aneu malakias*](2.40.1) Castoriadis argues that *φιλοκαλοῦμεν* [*philokaloumen*] and *φιλοσοφοῦμεν* [*philosophoumen*] are to be translated as "living in and through the love of beauty and of wisdom" respectively (1997: 97). This is obviously quite different from Charles Foster Smith's translation of the same passage as "For we are lovers of the beauty yet with no extravagance and lovers of wisdom yet without weakness" (1956: 327). The fact that Castoriadis refuses to translate *φιλοκαλοῦμεν* as "lovers of the beauty" and *φιλοσοφοῦμεν* as "lovers of wisdom" is significant, and stems from his considerations about the particular values, according to which the ancient Athenians conducted their lives. That is why he prefers a formulation ("living in and through the love of beauty and of wisdom") that explicitly lays bare a crucial aspect of his conception of the Athenian world of significations. Of course, one does not need to accept Castoriadis' translational approach, but it is clear that any possible alternative approach is necessarily based on a certain interpretive scheme.

Wardman, for instance, has proposed a quite different approach to Pericles' statement that rests on two interconnected presuppositions:

> First, the two assertions in this famous sentence both have the air of paradoxes. It is asserted that something is true of Athens which is not generally true of states, as of Sparta, or is not thought by other states to be the case. They are paradoxes designed to challenge 'commonplace' ideas or generally held opinions (*ἔνδοξα*) […] Secondly, Pericles is describing how Athens achieves two things; she can live a full and varied life in peace and can also carry on war more successfully than other states. (1959: 38)

In fact, these two presuppositions function as a guiding thread to understanding the meaning of the statement in question. As a first move, Wardman posits a parallelism between the two assertions contained in it: *φιλοκαλοῦμεν* and *φιλοσοφοῦμεν* refer to peace-time behaviour, whereas *εὐτελείας* and *μαλακίας* refer to war-time behaviour (1959: 38). This move is crucial especially for the translation of the last two terms, which admittedly have troubled Thucydides' translators. For the translation of *φιλοκαλοῦμεν* and *φιλοσοφοῦμεν* various sources are used (Plutarch, Diodorus Siculus, Isocrates, Lysias)—of course from the perspective dictated by Wardman's particular interpretive scheme—, but special attention is also given to the fact that the "funeral speech is closely knit and the parts inter-related" (Wardman 1959: 40). More specifically, *φιλοκαλοῦμεν* is understood as meaning "we like fine things" (Wardman 1959: 39), and *φιλοσοφοῦμεν* as "we like skillful discussion" (Wardman

1959: 40). The outcome of this approach is the following translation of Pericles' statement: "Our love of good things is compatible with economy and our love of discussion does not involve cowardice" (Wardman 1959: 42). It is a rendering that evidently echoes Wardman's main thesis that Pericles' statement consists of two paradoxes, both of which are "designed to refute *ἔνδοξα* about wealth and rhetoric; the first is that wealth makes men cowards, the second that talking makes men cowards" (1959:41). Consequently, the point of the statement is, according to Wardman, that "wealth is required for war, but success in war only comes if people economize; whereas love of discussion amuses the Athenians in peace and enables them to be brave in warfare" (1959: 42).

The case of ancient Greek texts and their translation to modern languages can provide innumerable examples similar to those discussed above. The difficulties involved in such an endeavour relate certainly to the characteristics of the particular target language that is each time selected as the second pole of the translation process. But they are also crucially rooted in the distance that separates different worldviews and cultures. This explains, among other things, why it is sometimes so difficult to translate an ancient Greek text even in modern Greek, despite the attested continuity between the two languages. Interestingly enough, to some extent this continuity poses further difficulties specific to the pair of languages in question. Consider, for instance, the Heraclitean concept of *κόσμος* [*kosmos*] and the translational problems caused by the fact that its similarity, at the level of the signifier, to the modern Greek word *κόσμος* conceals semantic dissimilarities that should be taken seriously into consideration by the translator. As Kirk remarks, "*κόσμος* for Heraclitus, in the early fifth century, must still have retained much of its basic meaning of 'order,' 'regularity;' it cannot just mean 'world' in our practical sense…" (Kirk 1951: 38; for a detailed account of the different meanings of *κόσμος*, see Kirk 1962: 311-316). But it is precisely this sense of *world* that predominates in current usage of the modern Greek term, with connotations of *order* and *regularity* appearing only dimly, if at all, in specific instances.

The brief examples discussed above offer a characteristic image of the kind of thick description involved in the act of translation. It is a kind of thick description that consists of countless interpretive moves, interrelated with each other in intricate ways, and carried out largely through multiple intertextual paths. As such, thick description necessarily rests on a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer 2004: 305). For, in effect, it constitutes an act of understanding discourses rooted in different worlds of significations and articulated in languages with different semiotic potentials. For that reason, it is each time an instance of an interaction between different worldviews. Translating a text ultimately requires not only a worldview from which meaning is to be assigned, but also the reshaping of the translator's pre-commitments and the consequent shifts in the hermeneutic horizon from

within which the approach to the source text was initially attempted. However, one might object that the aforementioned examples are precisely selected in such a way as to provide a distorted picture of translation that would fit the main theses expressed here. A reply to this objection could run as follows. One tends to think that in the case of ancient texts the interpretive dimension of translation is easily brought into relief, whereas in cases of translation between modern languages – and especially when there are considerable affinities between the source and the target language – that dimension is not clearly visible. The truth is that in most cases the interpretive dimension of translation is, at least at first sight, hardly visible, and it can be revealed only through a particular kind of analysis. In this sense, the main theses of the present article could equally well be corroborated by examples drawn from any other case of translation. The reader need only consider the difficulties involved in the translation of the Saussurean notion of *langue*; or even Roy Harris' remark about the severe problems involved in any attempt to translate Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* or Wittgenstein's *Philosophische Untersuchungen* in a language that lacks anything corresponding to the terms, *grammar*, *game*, *rule*, *rule of grammar*, and *rule of game* (Harris 1988: 69). The differences among the various cases of translation do not prove the partial role of interpretation in the act of translation; they merely highlight the peculiarities of the different interpretive tasks posed to translators. In sum, the nature itself of texts as social products that are created from the webs of significance of a given society, and are each time co-constituted as such in the act of interpretation, entails that what has been repeatedly designated here as the interpretive dimension of translation is in fact its necessary condition. There is always a *sui generis* thick description inherent in the act of translation. A thick description that can be partially reconstituted and analysed only by means of some other kind of thick description!

6. Concluding Remarks

Given the current status of Translation Studies, a discussion concerning the difficulties involved in theorising about the cultural aspects of translation might seem rather unnecessary. After all, one would say, translation *is undoubtedly* an act of intercultural communication; *this* should be the unquestionable starting point for any modern research in translation. It is obvious that the aim of the present article is not to challenge indisputable facts. Rather, the main point is that what presents itself as a unanimously accepted thesis is in fact open to multiple interpretations due to the polysemy of the term *culture*. Accounting for the cultural aspects of translation is inevitably affected by the still unsettled debates about culture. Acknowledging this fact, we have attempted to outline a theoretically justifiable conception which, hopefully, will urge us to take a different look at some truisms about translation.

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