POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES AND TRANSLATION THEORY

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Abstract

What distinguishes postcolonial approaches to translation is that they examine inter-cultural encounters in contexts marked by unequal power relations. Herein lie their strengths as well as their weaknesses. Their major contribution has been to illuminate the role of power in the production and reception of translation. But it is not certain that the postcolonial framework can be applied to other interlingual exchanges with minimal inequality of power relations. Moreover, there is a general tendency to under-rate the differences among (post)colonial contexts themselves. It is suggested that in-sufficient attention to the socio-political background of translation has been reflected in postcolonial formulations of resistance, which are typically purely textual. It is argued also that some postcolonial perspectives, rejecting reductive appropriations of other cultures, may have been led to some sort of reification of difference, reflected in a rather pessimistic insistence on the inaccessibility of the position of the Other.

Resumen

La característica diferenciadora que poseen los enfoques postcoloniales en traducción radica en el hecho de que éstos analizan encuentros interculturales que se desarrollan en contextos marcados por desequilibrios en las relaciones de poder y es ahí donde se manifiestan tanto sus virtudes como sus defectos. Su mayor aportación ha sido sacar a la luz el papel del poder en la producción y recepción de traducciones. Sin embargo, se duda de que las teorías postcoloniales puedan aplicarse satisfactoriamente a otros intercambios interlingüísticos en los que las desigualdades en las relaciones de poder sean mínimas. Por otra parte, existe una tendencia generalizada a infravalorar las dife-rencias existentes entre los contextos (post)coloniales y se sugiere que las expresiones de resistencia propias de este movimiento, por lo general puramente textuales, dan muestra de que se ha prestado una atención insuficiente a las circunstancias sociopo-líticas de la traducción. Asimismo se arguye que cabe la posibilidad de que determi-nadas perspectivas postcoloniales, al rechazar la apropiación reduccionista de otras

culturas, hayan fomentado un cierto tipo de cosificación de la diferencia, que se refleja en una insistencia un tanto pesimista sobre el hecho de que es imposible ponerse en el lugar del Otro.

Keywords: Postcolonial Studies. Resistance. Orientalism. Politics. Culture.

Palabras clave: Estudios postcoloniales. Resistencia. Orientalismo. Política. Cultura.

Questions of identity, representation, and difference – central to any cultural framework of translation – assume a heightened and distinctive status in postcolonial studies. What characterizes this field is that it examines intercultural relations in contexts marked predominantly by unequal power relations. Indeed, translation in the colonial condition has been described as "an overarching metaphor for the unequal power relationship which defines the condition of the colonized" (Bassnett & Trivedi 1999: 12). As a result, the political dimensions of translation here are thrown into bold relief. Maria Tymoczko, for example, finds postcolonial theories of translation a means of providing "an exit from the textualized world of French criticism and a return to practical experience, particularly when the practical experience can make compelling appeals for engagement and action, as can the situation of peoples struggling with disadvantaged positions" (2000: 32). The questions of engagement, action, and struggle are, indeed, central. For, due to their complicity in processes of coercion, exploitation, and colonial administration, issues of the representation of, and interaction with, the Other acquire an oppositional, confrontational character. Herein, it can be argued, lie the strengths as well as the weaknesses of postcolonial approaches to translation.

1. Culture/Language/Power

The major accomplishment of postcolonial studies has been their exploration of the symbiotic connection between language and culture in the colonial context. They reveal how Western translation practices heralded, aided, and perpetuated colonial expansion. According to Bassnett and Trivedi (1999: 3), "colonialism and translation went hand in hand." To begin with, the translation of the cultural products of the colonized provided colonialist administrators with the necessary knowledge to manage the local populations. This is why colonialist enterprises were usually accompanied by large-scale translation movements, whose aim was to transcribe the local culture for the new rulers. According to the scholar and translator William Jones, who was "responsible for the most influential introduction of a textualized India to Europe," translation had to serve "to domesticate the Orient and thereby turn it into a province of European learning" (Niranjana 1992: 12).

On the other hand, translating the colonial culture into the language of the colonized helped inculcate them into the linguistic and cultural norms of the dominant nation. In this connection, applying the work of the anthropologist James T. Siegel to the colonial context of the Spanish missionary activity in the Philippines, Vicente Rafael argues: "Translation in this case involves not simply the ability to speak in a language other than one's own

but the capacity to reshape one's thoughts and actions in accordance with accepted forms" (1993: 210). As this statement implies, language is not simply a colonialist instrument. The very structures of control that define colonial domination are inscribed within it. Thus Anuradha Dingwaney talks about "the language (and way of life) that the self inhabits by virtue of being embedded within it" (1996: 7).

While the postcolonial correlation of language and culture coincides with the "cultural turn" in translation studies, the major contribution of postcolonialism, it could be said, has been its inquiry into the effects of power. Once we become aware of this dimension, we can recognize the political aspects of translation practices that may have looked politically neutral or only "technical". We can ask, for instance, whether Eugene Nida's theoretical framework, which seems to be decidedly rooted in linguistics, was influenced by the ideology of the missionary work in which his Bible translation research operated. Does his insistence on "universals" reflect only a linguistic standpoint or the drive to universalize the beliefs and cultural values of the West? Why is it always the case that this "universal" system of thought happens to be a Western one? Is Nida's valorization of equivalence and domestication not simply the transference of the values of the center, in an attempt to assimilate other people into its tenets? Moreover, one could also examine the extent to which Nida's translation research was facilitated by its alliance with a hegemonic culture, and whether it was affected by the colonial connections of the missionary work for which it was intended, and whose aim it was meant to aid.

Another case in point can be found in Douglas Robinson's "Decolonizing Translation," where he compares two books that cover roughly the same period in the history of European translation – classical Rome up to the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – but with notably different findings. Robinson argues that, in his *Interpretatio: Language and Translation from Cicero to Tyler*, Frederick M. Rener shows us "a lockstep formal system that anyone of worth […] knew and implicitly obeyed" (1994: 114). But Rener, Robinson says, "fails to problematize the political inculcation of this system […] he fails to move past mystified and ideologically naturalized technical problems to broader social problems of orthodoxy and heresy […] intellectual and political power" (*ibid.* 117). In Eric Cheyfitz's *The Poetics of Imperialism*, on the other hand, "what Rener formalizes as a monolithic system of linguistic norms and conventions, Cheyfitz politicizes as a geopolitical will to power, a series of […] attempts to *impose* a system on the 'aimless wandering' of the 'savage'" (*ibid.* 114).

Certainly, the (post)colonial condition – with its radical asymmetries of power, and the political (even the military) engagements that it is fraught with – is a perfect locus to examine issues of power and its ramifications in language and translation. The question arises, however, of whether the post-colonialist angle could be extended to other interlingual encounters where no veritable (post)colonial relations obtain. One could argue that, as Foucault for one has shown, power permeates all forms of communication; there is really no neutral or politics-free encounter. On this account, the (post)colonial situation is not a unique mode of linguistic or cultural interaction, but one where relations that could otherwise be occulted are crystallized and brought into focus. Yet, it is not difficult to cite many examples where power relations are not the defining element, especially between those cultures that are more or less "similar," those where there is no recent history of political or military confrontations, or in situations where the power balance does not seem to be dramatically skewed. Of course, one should be wary of unwarranted optimism: the political stakes in a certain communicative act may well be obscured by linguistic or stylistic technicalities. However, it is clear, as Maria Tymoczko argues, that one cannot simply treat postcoloniality as an "ontological condition" without "reflecting specific historical, economic, and cultural configurations" (2000: 32). The problems of coercion and resistance in interlingual encounters in Canadian Quebec, for example, are not the same that obtain in those between English and Indian languages in the colonial or postcolonial era, or between French and the modern Arabic of Maghrebi literature (from the Arab North African countries of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia) – not to mention translation between English and French, or German and Swedish, among others. It may be the case that these are differences not of quality but extent – but it is a significant extent.

2. Postcolonialisms

Postcolonialist translation scholars, then, deal with considerably varied contexts, which accounts for the differences in their emphases. Several considerations should be taken into account here. Are we talking about colonial, or postcolonial situations? Does the translation take place from, or into, the colonizers' language? And who is doing the translation: the colonial subject, the colonizer, or the postcolonial critic? What from of colonization is involved? How direct or violent is it? How similar, or coeval, if any, are the two languages, and the ways of life associated with them?

These and other questions lead to different positions on how to approach the colonial experience, how to respond to it, or to resist it. For example,

Rafael's analysis (1993) of the role of translation in the dynamics of power at work in the Spanish colonization of the Tagalogs in the Philippines, and the resistance directed at it, derives from the nature of Spanish colonialism itself. The Spanish rule employed an aggressive policy of conversion, aided by an active translation project, whose aim was to indoctrinate the local people into the colonizers' worldview. Rafael discusses the apparent enthusiasm with which the Tagalogs converted to Christianity and assimilated the Spanish ways of life. But "in dealing with the shock of colonization," he says, they "sought ways to domesticate its dislocating effects"; for "the colonized subjects had yet to find ways to fit 'Spain' and 'Christianity' into a context familiar to them" (1993: xix). The solution for the Tagalogs was to assimilate the colonizers' discourse by virtually "mistranslating" it and accommodating it to their own worldview. Faced with new and unfamiliar terms (especially religious ones), they adapted them into their familiar signifying systems and gave them their own twist "in ways that left the missionaries puzzled and disturbed" (*ibid.* 115). That was their "strategy of decontextualizing the means by which the colonial authority represents itself" (*ibid.* 3). "Translating the untranslatable," says Rafael, "entailed deferring to the signs of authority while at the same time eluding the meaning and intent behind those signs" (*ibid.* 121).

On similar grounds, Homi Bhabha constructs his theoretical tropes of "mimicry" and "hybridity." He examines how Indians responded to the assimilative projects of the British colonial rule. What was required of them was some form of imitation of the British – their language, religion, and customs. The strategy that they used to evade these Eurocentric demands is the basis of what Bhabha defines as mimicry. It is, again, repetition with a twist, an imitation which appropriates the colonial discourse and puts it in new contexts that virtually send it off track. "It is between the edict of Englishness," Bhabha says, "and the assault of the dark unruly spaces of the earth, through an act of repetition, that the colonial text emerges uncertainly" (1984: 93). Bhabha identifies a

> process of splitting as the condition of subjection; a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles, where the trace of what is avowed is not repressed, but repeated as something *different*—a mutation, a hybrid. (1984: 97)

Indeed, this hybridity afflicts the colonial discourse at its source, as Bhabha reveals the contradictions and discrepancies at the heart of British liberal attempts to rationalize colonialism:

in 'normalizing' the colonial state or subject, the dream of post-Enlightenment civility alienates its own language of liberty […] The ambivalence which thus informs this strategy is discernible, for example, in Locke's second Treatise which splits to reveal the limitations of liberty in his double use of the word 'slave'. (1994: 86)

There is no doubt that these conceptualizations, original and stimulating as they are, have been influenced considerably by the specific cultural and political contexts they draw upon. In each case, we have a colonial strategy that stresses discursive subjugation, as it were, through translation and language instruction. But one wonders if the same methods of resistance that Rafael and Bhabha describe would have any impact against a colonialist power that has no interest in adapting the colonized to its own culture, but only in appropriating their land, seizing their property, and exploiting them for material profit. What if the colonizers did not even want to administer the colonized but to dislodge them from their land? What if the colonialist ideology that underlies this venture does not have any liberal or post-Enlightenment pretensions or justifications, but is one that is flagrantly racist or fascist – an ideology that justifies exploitative practices on the basis of the superiority of some race, religion, or national group, and its inherent right to appropriate other peoples' lands? What kind of "ambivalence" could one detect in this discourse? It is this inattention to the material effects of colonial power (in favor of linguistic and textual analysis) that Benita Parry, herself an incisive critic of (post)colonialist exploitation, identifies as a major weakness of postcolonial approaches in general. She notes how in some postcolonial readings, "an air-borne will to power was privileged over calculated compulsions, 'discursive violence' took precedence over the practices of a violent system, and the intrinsically antagonistic colonial encounter was reconfigured as one of dialogue, complicity and transculturation" (2004: 4).

3. Strategies of Resistance

In the opposite direction of intercultural encounters (i.e. in the transfer from the "periphery" to the "center"), Said Faiq, in "Subverted Representation in *La Nuit Sacrée* and its Arabic Translation" (2001), and Mahasweta Sengupta, in "Translation as Manipulation" (1996), examine translations *into* hegemonic languages – French and English respectively – to reach generally similar conclusions. The two studies illustrate the ways in which the metropolitan culture of the colonizer imposes certain paradigms and modes of expectation with regard to works coming from the (former) colonies. Such works are expected to conform to a particular set of images of what an "authentic"

representation of that culture should be. Taking this in mind, Faiq and Sengupta each describe how a writer from a (formerly) colonized nation consciously transforms his work and adapts it to the norms that govern translation between the two languages in question.

First, the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, translating his works (practically rewriting them in English), had to adjust his poetry in line with the prevailing images of India that had been formed in England over a long historical period and had become something of an orthodoxy. Texts from "Oriental" languages "were presented as specimens of a culture that is 'simple,' 'natural,' and in the case of India, in particular, 'other-worldly' or 'spiritual as well'" (Sengupta 1996: 160). It is evidence of the power of the preexisting discursive parameters in English that such a major genius as Tagore "had to succumb to the power of the 'image' of the 'Orient' as it had been produced by the English" (*ibid.* 171). Tagore, Sengupta argues, "fell into the stereotypical image of the saint of the 'East' who spoke of peace, calm, and spiritual bliss in a troubled world entering the cauldron of the First World War" (*ibid.* 167).

On the other hand, while not veritable translations into French, the Moroccan novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun's writings in the ex-colonial language portray his native Islamic and Moroccan society, thereby "translating" it for the French reader. Ben Jelloun's language is distinguished by strong "bilingualism or translingualism", where two languages clash, interact, and translate each other. Contrary to widely-held assumptions, however, Faiq argues that these qualities do not make Ben Jelloun's works "oppositional to the French cultural representations of the Arabs and Islam" (Faiq 2001: 48); nor do these works "represent any resistance of oppression both internal and external" (*ibid.* 42). Again, the reason is that "the representation of the native cultures and peoples – through writing about or translating from them – has been carried out in ways that are compatible with existing frames, discursive strategies and ideologies in the cultures of the ex-colonial powers" (*ibid.* 43). In particular, Maghrebi writers in French had to conform to a dominant French representation of Arabic culture and society which stresses images of violence, eroticism, and mystery (*ibid.* 47). Since a "third-world" writer could join "world culture and literature with the proviso that the ex-colonizer be the judge of any success" (*ibid.* 44), Ben Jelloun resorted to "subverted" representations of his culture that comply with the paradigms prevalent in the target French. In this way, any subversive intentions these texts might have claimed were contained and normalized into unthreatening stereotypes.

One advantage of Faiq's analysis is that it provides a cogent counterargument to the widely circulated calls in postcolonial and postmodernist theories

for a new kind of "plurilingual" writing that inhabits a "hybrid" space "in-between" languages and cultures – what Bhabha calls a "third space". Such a practice, it is maintained, could create a site for critiquing, and subverting, the binaries of Self and Other and the fixities of monolingual identities. As we have seen, the texts produced by Ben Jelloun and other authors from the Maghreb display all the features of this "border writing". They contain

> layerings of languages and cultures that have resulted in a French language with its own discursive strategies. The project of the great majority of [those writers] has been to interrogate French discourses and discursive strategies from a somewhat privileged position: within and in-between two languages or more, two worlds, two cultures or more. (Faiq 2001: 45)

Nevertheless, this linguistic experimentation does not necessarily produce resistant or subversive texts. As Faiq demonstrates in his analysis of Ben Jelloun's *La Nuit Sacrée*, the bilingualism and subverted representation strategies serve instead to perpetuate Eurocentric stereotypes. It is not difficult to find the cause of this paradox. For what we have here is an example of "translations of texts from cultures that are not civilizationally linked, and among which exists an unequal power relationship" (Sengupta 1996: 59). If anything, postcolonial studies have emphasized how unequal power relations shape the reception of foreign texts. But it is one thing to engage in translation and interlingual performance in the "contact zone" between Quebec French and Canadian English (two communities that belong to the same Western country, where no longstanding preconceptions or a drastic disparity of power relations override individual intentions); it is another thing to try to interrogate dominant modes of representation from a disadvantaged power position, when images about one's culture are sustained by a long history of (mis)representation that is only reinforced by current political realities. It could be observed here that even in the case of "the border writing" described by Sherry Simon (1999), for example, there is a good case to argue that the rise of such practices coincided with socio-political developments in Canada that set the stage for these linguistic experiments.

3.1 Resistance of/in the Language of Power

This neglect of the sociopolitical background of the text points to what is arguably a major problem in postcolonial studies. As mentioned above, post-colonialist critics have emphasized that language is not a neutral tool – that translation can never be a purely technical activity. They insist that one has always to consider the larger framework of power relations in which intercultural and interlingual transfer takes place. But having established that, they

tend to separate linguistic performance from its context and treat it almost as an end in itself. On this account, the linguistic aspects of translation do not merely reflect cultural and political realities; they could also change them.

Nowhere is this problem more apparent than in postcolonialist theoretical formulations of resistance. Most propositions in this respect – Bhabha's mimicry and hybridity, Simon's contact zone bilingualism, Niranjana's "translation as disruption" (1992: 163 ff.), Spivak's literalism (2000: 400 ff.) – are purely textual, confined to translation techniques on the linguistic level. In his pointed critique of postcolonial theory, the Marxist intellectual Aijaz Ahmad sees a somehow insidious purpose to these approaches to resistance. It is arguable, he says, "that dominant strands within this 'theory' […] have been mobilized to domesticate, in institutional ways, the very forms of political dissent which those movements had sought to foreground, to displace an activist culture with a textual culture" (1994: 1). Whether or not one agrees with Ahmad about the supposed objectives of postcolonial approaches, it is not difficult to observe their tendency, in Benita Parry's phrase, "towards collapsing the social into the textual" (2004: 4). This propensity for "textual idealism" *(ibid.* 3) could arguably be even higher in the field of translation studies, which, by its very nature, has to locate the problems of language and textuality at the center of its inquiry. In his comment on the papers in Dingwaney and Maier's *Between Languages and Cultures* (1996), the anthropologist Talal Asad stresses that "the structures of power the colonized writer confronts are institutional, not textual" (1996: 330). In other words, bilingual resonances, intertextual devises, and stylistic innovations do not necessarily subvert the dominant cultural hegemony. Such practices, Asad remarks, were used by Eliot, Pound, and the Surrealists in an attempt to question the assumptions of bourgeois culture. Eventually, however, these devises were institutionalized and integrated into the "system". For "the modern world culture", Asad says, "has no difficulty in accommodating unstable signs and domesticated exotica, so long as neither conflicts radically with systems of profit" (*ibid.* 331).

To be sure, this caveat is not meant to diminish the role of the individual agency of the translator. But one should be wary of generalizations based only on the discursive aspects of cultural practices, of glibly "treating resistance to colonialism as a 'discursive practice' which is already 'postcolonial'" (Ahmad 1997: 366). Many contextual elements mediate the reception, and final socio-political effects, of translation. What works for one situation may not work for others; it is impossible to recommend one approach that would function across the board. Asad argues for the need for a "more systematic consideration of the social preconditions and consequences of translating

Western discourses" (*ibid.* 329). Similarly, Maria Tymoczko (citing the Irish nationalists' English translations of ancient Gaelic literature in the context of their struggle against British colonization as a successful example of enlisting translation in political causes) emphasizes the necessity of tying any projects of political resistance through translation with actual sociopolitical conditions and the struggles for liberation and justice fought by material, non-textual means (2000: 41-42). Thus, while the individual translator has no control over the external conditions that shape the communicative act, it could be said that he/she should at least strive to acquire a full knowledge of them before adjusting his/her translation to the relevant contextual parameters.

4. Radical Inaccessibility?

In *The Poetics of Imperialism*, Eric Cheyfitz writes:

> I have not tried to *understand* Native Americans or blacks in this book. I do not believe in philanthropy, which presumes an understanding of the position of the other, but in social justice which presumes nothing, but grounds itself in the politics of imagining kinship across the boundaries of race, gender, and class. (1991: vii)

In his review of the book, Douglas Robinson points out that "Cheyfitz does seek to understand and place himself within the position of the other throughout the book" (1994: 120). Indeed, how could one undertake to study the position of the Other (as Cheyfitz certainly does) or to imagine kinship across cultural and linguistic boundaries without some understanding of the Other?

It seems that some postcolonial approaches, in their refusal to engage in reductive appropriations of different cultures, and their justifiable rejection of facile universalism, have been led to some sort of reification of difference. This abandonment of any attempt to understand the Other may lead us, as Tzvetan Todorov argues, "to renounce the very idea of shared humanity, and this would be even more dangerous than ethnocentric universalism" (1986: 374). While the refusal to project oneself into the position of Others may reflect respect for their individuality and cultural uniqueness, the insistence on the incompatibility of cultures may actually facilitate racist and essentialist attitudes. For "Otherness," says Todorov, "is never radical. This implies not that the task is simple but that if we allow ourselves to believe in its feasibility, we can acquire an even deeper understanding of Others" (*ibid.*).

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said addresses the same issue in more concrete terms. He argues that "although there is an irreducible subjective core to human experience, this experience is also historical and secular, it is accessible to analysis and interpretation […] it is not exhausted by totalizing

theories, not marked and limited by doctrinal or national lines" (1993: 30). The problem with views that assert difference and exclusiveness, he says, is that they generate "polarizations" that may rationalize ignorance and dogmatism more than they promote tolerance. Said comments on some modern approaches to the question of difference and identity:

> Even the most cursory look at the recent fortunes of theories about race, the modern state, modern nationalism itself verifies this sad truth. If you know in advance that the African or Iranian or Chinese or Jewish or German experience is fundamentally integral, coherent, separate, and therefore comprehensible only to Africans, Iranians, Chinese, Jews or Germans, you first of all posit as essential something which, I believe, is both historically created and the result of interpretation – namely the existence of Africanness, Jewishness, or Germanness, or for that matter Orientalism and Occidentalism […] If at the outset we acknowledge the massively knotted and complex histories of special but nevertheless overlapping and interconnected experiences […] there is no particular intellectual reason for granting each and all of them an ideal and essentially separate status. (1993: 31-2)

In the introduction to *Between Languages and Cultures*, Dingwaney refers to Ashis Nandy's discussion of Khomeini's *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie in the context of her criticism of familiarizing other cultures, a process which, she believes, deprives them of their "foreignness," and "even perhaps of their radical inaccessibility" (1996: 5). Nandy claims that the "frenzied discussion" of Khomeini's religious edict in the West "can be read as an attempt to make [the *fatwa*] understandable – by turning it into a marker of a known form of insanity" (quoted in Dingwaney & Maier 1996: 5). Few people, he says, "were willing to admit that the *fatwa* was an unknown form of communication" (*ibid.*).

It can be argued, however, that this "(mis)translation" is not the result of the ethnocentric effects of familiarization, but rather of a deliberate intent *not* to understand the position of the Other by attaching it to ready-made labels. Such an attitude has nothing to do with familiarization or foreignization. For it is not clear at all how the necessity of declaring that the *fatwa* is not like anything that the West has known would encourage more tolerance. In fact, it is more than likely that to despair of the possibility of understanding this form of communication and the culture that produced it would actually intensify the impression of its irrationality. It seems much more helpful in these circumstances to try to approximate (or one could even say, familiarize) this foreign product by linking it to comparable discursive practices in the West – the papal excommunication, for example. This is, of course, not to suggest that these religious practices are identical, but such an approximation would

be an initial step toward putting the issue in some sort of perspective, which could potentially lead to less dismissive or "frenzied" reactions.

5. Conclusion

Postcolonial translation studies have contributed significantly to translation theory, not only through their investigation of actual (post)colonial interactions, but also as a mode of analysis that could illustrate crucial issues of identity, difference, and power. While their oppositional nature may have sometimes led to essentializing tendencies, their findings and methods may still have analytical capacity for other areas of translation, especially those where (asymmetrical) power relations play a defining part. It seems that the main challenge in this regard is to pay close attention to the marked differences in (post)colonial contexts, while maintaining a common focus, based on the considerable commonalities and often shared causes that unite postcolonial critics in the field of translation.

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