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HOMENAGEM A
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THE EDGE OF ONE OF MANY CIRCLES

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TOWARDS A CRITIQUE OF “MENTAL TRANSLATIONS”

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Resumo: É propósito deste artigo examinar criticamente aquela que, na área da tradução pós-colonial, se tornou na posição dominante no que diz respeito à natureza da narrativa africana redigida na língua do ex-colonizador, aqui designada por escrita intercultural. De acordo com a teoria atual, estas narrativas não são senão traduções de oratura em literatura, ou seja, elementos específicos de uma cultura oral nativa literalmente “traduzidos” para a língua e cultura europeias em que a narrativa foi escrita (cf. Paul Bandia, *Translation as Reparation*, 2008).

Pretende-se demonstrar: 1) que tal posição faz parte de uma tendência mais geral nas humanidades para usar o conceito de tradução metaforicamente, isto é, tradução que não implica transferências entre línguas nem textos de partida, e 2) que essa tendência é criticável tanto do ponto de vista lógico como do político, segundo argumentação apresentada. Sublinha-se em particular que um dos riscos envolvidos na noção de tradução sem original pode ser o de acabarmos por nos confrontar com uma cultura global monolíngue e daí ser cada vez mais difícil apercebermo-nos da alteridade

do Outro (cf. Harish Trivedi, “Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation”, 2005).

Palavras-chave: tradução; escrita intercultural; estudos pós-coloniais; literatura africana; tradução enquanto metáfora.

Abstract: In this paper I address critically what has become the mainstream view in the field of postcolonial translation regarding the nature of the African Europhone novel, which is described as intercultural writing. As the current theory goes, African Europhone novels are basically translations of orature into literature, i.e., specific elements of a native oral culture are literally “translated” into the European culture and language in which the novel is written (cf. Paul Bandia, *Translation as Reparation*, 2008).

This position is shown to be part of a wider tendency in the humanities to use the concept of translation metaphorically, that is to say, translation that does not involve language transfers from source texts. I claim that this move is disputable on logical and political grounds and will line up a few arguments that may help to discern what is damagingly at stake in the notion of translation without originals, in particular the risk of ending up with a monolingual global culture that makes it increasingly hard to experience otherness (cf. Harish Trivedi, “Translating culture vs. cultural translation”, 2005).

Keywords: translation; intercultural writing; postcolonial studies; African literature; translation as metaphor.

In the academic field of postcolonial translation a new concept has recently cropped up: it is called intercultural writing as translation and aims at describing the African novels written in the former colonizers' languages as the outcome of a process of transposition of orature into literature, that is, specific elements of a native oral culture expressed in their language are supposedly translated into the European language in which the novel is written. As Paul Bandia, the most thorough advocate of this position, puts it in his *Translation as Reparation*, the result is a "hybrid text, a sort of creolized translation," "a blend of orality and writing, of African and European language cultures" (2008: 159), of which there is no shortage of examples, from the works of the Anglophone Chinua Achebe, to the Francophone Ahmadou Kourouma or the Lusophone Luandino Vieira, among others.

For Bandia this concept lays the foundation of a postcolonial theory geared specifically to African literature, to literary works produced within polylingual cultures that are on the whole alien to the dominant monolingual cultures of the West and therefore, in their hybridized shape, can be seen as resistant to the dominant colonial languages (2008: 3, 136). Now, this is certainly an attractive theory, both from an aesthetic and from a political point of view; however, its persuasive power rests wholly on the premise that it is sensibly acceptable to conflate a *metaphorical* conception of translation with translation proper. In other words, nothing distinguishes translation without originals from, to use Lawrence Venuti's definition, translation as "a process by which the chain of signifiers that constitutes the source-language text is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target language which the translator provides on the strength of an interpretation" (17).

In what follows, firstly I will claim, that intercultural writing as translation is part of a much wider current tendency to figuratively apply the notion of translation to all sorts of movements, crossings

and dislocations, including of people – let us recall Salmon Rushdie’s famous assertion “we are translated men.” (17) –; secondly, I will argue that this view, in addition to posing logical and political problems, is crucially silent about the concrete challenges translators face in coping with cultural difference.

It is a known fact that translation has been extensively appropriated by a host of discourses and disciplines which, in the attempt to sort out their own theoretical problems, resort to what both Gayatri Spivak (238) and Homi Bhabha (188) have called a ‘catachrestic’ use of the concept-turned-metaphor. In philosophy, ethnography, cultural and literary studies, interart studies, sociology, and, most relevant to the argument I am unfolding here, postcolonial studies, translation has become, rather than an object of scrutiny, a piece of the metalanguage employed to account for all kinds of social and cultural processes involving transfers, shifts, exchanges, and negotiations. Translation has indeed become a kind of catchword, or rather a password that gives right of entry to – as Anthony Pym wryly puts it – “a way of talking about the world” (148).

It comes as no surprise then that, in addition to its function in academic conversation, the scope and scale of the theoretical uses the translation metaphor can be put to have never ceased to increase. All in all, they end up constructing a holistic view of culture as *total translation*, a position taken up most thoroughly by Peeter Torop, a disciple of the Tartu school of semiotics building on Roman Jakobson’s famous 1959 essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation”. Predictably, the discourses whose purpose is to provide knowledge about cultural processes and products are likewise subject to a translation turn, as recently illustrated by a special issue of the journal *Translation Studies*, which explicitly sets out to remap the “humanities as a kind of ‘translation studies’” (Bachmann-Medick 12). But by far the most successful development of the culture-as-translation position is what Shirley Ann Jordan called “the fuzzy and

contested concept” of cultural translation (96), which has become the stock-in-trade of much postcolonial criticism and theory (Duarte 2008).

As is well known, the concept originates in Talal Asad’s essay “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology”, in which it is defined as “the tendency to read the *implicit* in alien cultures” (160). The implicit here refers to the meanings of an oral culture constructed by the anthropologist for the sake of a Western, mostly academic readership and which are not necessarily those of the native population itself. In this sense, cultural translation, while exposing the anthropologist’s illusion of objectivity and transparency, brings out the massive inequality of languages and cultures grounding until very recently the ethnographic project.

Most influential in circulating the concept particularly in postcolonial studies has been Homi Bhabha’s essay “How Newness Enters the World” (303-37); here cultural translation accounts for the negotiating processes that take place in the Third Space of migrant communities, by means of which new products emerge expressive neither of the source nor of the host cultures values, but rather of something “in-between” (Duarte 2005).

But from the point of view of translation theory, the story goes back to Samia Mehrez’s essay “Translation And the Postcolonial Experience: The Francophone North African Text”, of 1992, in which she looks at Francophone literature from North Africa in terms of hybrid and “métissé” texts constructed by the intertwining of the ex-colonizer’s language and the writer’s own native language. While these bilingual texts are located, culturally and linguistically, in a space in-between, they challenge mainstream binary conceptions of translation, therefore questioning the very notion of foreignness ready to be translated and, she points out, demanding from the readers an experience akin to translating (Mehrez 121-22). Building on this essay, Maria Tymoczko goes one step further, claiming that

translation might be used as a figure for postcolonial writing, that is, postcolonial texts are themselves translations while being at the same time translations of themselves (1999; 2000). The argument is predicated on a series of analogies between the postcolonial writer and the translator, which leads her to the following line of reasoning:

The culture or tradition of a post-colonial writer acts as a metatext which is rewritten. . . in the act of literary creation. The task of the interlingual translator has much in common with the task of the post-colonial writer; where one has a text, however, the other has the metatext of culture itself. (1999: 21; see also Bandia 2003; 2006)

Postcolonial authors themselves may have been the first to invite such a figurative gesture. The Nigerian writer Gabriel Okara, for instance, is often quoted in a 1963 statement to substantiate the view that writing is translation:

As a writer who believes in the utilization of African ideas, African philosophy and African folklore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as medium of expression. (qtd. in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986: 8)

The African scholar Moradewan Adejunmobi, in turn, proposes a three-tiered typology of *all* African literature, namely compositional translations, authorized translations and complex translations, of which only the second category encompasses translation in the proper sense of the term. The theoretical scene is thus set for

the kind of sweeping generalizations such as the following one put forward by Leo Tak-Hung Chan: “all texts can ultimately be considered translations, regardless of whether they have undergone the process of verbal transfer that we usually call ‘translation’” (69).

This and similar claims by authors and scholars alike helped to fashion the theory of double translation to describe what goes on in the transfer of African literature written in European languages to another European language. To sum up: at the first stage the creative writer engages in intermedial translation, that is, he/she “translates” elements of his/her oral language and culture, such as proverbs, folktales, myths, songs and other native lore, into writing (sometimes a non-standard variety of the colonizer’s language). The second stage involves interlingual translation, or translation in its literal sense (see Gyasi 83). This is what Paul Bandia calls intercultural translation, which, he claims, amounts to “re-translating a translated text” (2008: 162).

Now, whether we are dealing with total translation, cultural translation, or writing as translation – and regardless of what the creative practices of authors may be –, I believe the contemporary widespread use of the translation trope is disputable on logical and political grounds. Firstly, there is little sense in saying that an interlingual translator has in common with a postcolonial writer the fact that the former transfers a text while the latter transfers the metatext of culture. If we are willing to leave aside wordplay, what remains is that rendering a source text into a target text involves not only languages but crucially cultures, as translation studies has been arguing for the last three decades. Thus, whether we are coping with translation proper or postcolonial texts, the so-called metatext of culture is always present in their respective processes. Furthermore, since there is no translation which is not at the same time translation *of culture*, as theory and scholarship

have been showing for a long time, the phrase “cultural translation” must be seen at best as redundant: how could one conceive of “non-cultural” translation?

Secondly, when everything becomes translation the concept loses its explanatory power, particularly as it is taken for granted that everybody agrees on its meaning; in other words, that for some stroke of luck or mysterious reason translation is wholly non-problematic and therefore up for grabs. The danger then lies, as Terry Eagleton pointed out as regards the category of culture, in “expanding the term to the point of meaninglessness” (131). Or, similarly, according to Andrew Chesterman, “the concept [of translation] itself becomes so broad that its original sense risks being diluted into nothing” (103).

Thirdly, and most cogently, in “Translating culture vs. cultural translation” the Indian scholar Harish Trivedi takes issue with Homi Bhaba’s concept of cultural translation, as well as with Salman Rushdie’s, Hanif Kureishi’s and Jhumpa Lahiri’s “abuse” of the term translation, arguing that, when what is at stake is translation that does not involve two languages, then what we are left with is simply non-translation. To put it differently, when everything is translation, nothing gets translated, and Trivedi concludes ominously that “we shall sooner or later end up with a wholly . . . monocultural, monolithic world” in which, “[r]ather than help us encounter and experience other cultures, translation would have been assimilated in just one monolingual global culture” (2005: 259).

Fourthly: translation that does not involve two languages. Indeed, what turns translation into a figure is precisely the absence of the original, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o candidly admits:

I would say that my novels – *The River Between*, *Weep not Child* – are mental translations. What happens in that process is that there is an original text which should have been there but which

is lost. But when you have a true translation, you do actually have two texts. (2003: 7)

In the culture-as-translation stance, in all its guises, then, one translates mentally, without any previous text to be replaced with another written in a different language on the strength of the translator's interpretation and conception of equivalence.

Of course nothing is inherently wrong in using metaphors as concepts; Western culture has been doing this since Antiquity, and in the case of original *vs.* translation it may be viewed as a practical way of deconstructing the classic polarity. There are, however, implications one should be aware of. Given that, according to Susan Bassnett, "Translation. . . is a primary method of imposing meaning while concealing the power relations that lie behind the production of that meaning" (136), then, when "translation" is carried out in the absence of an original, the act of concealment is understandably raised to a higher level. Nothing can be said about the strategies employed by the translator in rendering what is specific in the target culture – in fact, agency and its accountability are effectively elided – and in what ways they respond to target-culture norms and ideologies; no knowledge can be acquired as to why texts are selected for translation and manipulated, and how translation re-enacts the unequal relations between cultures: central *vs.* peripheral, strong *vs.* weak, or dominating *vs.* dominated. In sum, ethics and politics are totally played down in the translation metaphor.

Regarding the Europhone African novel, finally, one is at pains to discern why authors should be seen as translating rather than appropriating or drawing on native languages and modes of expression, as Chinua Achebe did for West African Pidgin in some of his novels and Luandino Vieira did in his work for the mixture of Portuguese and Kimbundu spoken by the slum-dwellers of the

Luanda region of Angola. Furthermore, one is also hard put to recognize what in this respect distinguishes the African novel from the tradition of western novel, whose aesthetics, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, rely entirely on an artistic appropriation of the many languages and discourses existing in society. Bakhtin called it heteroglossia or polyphony; he never dreamt of calling novels “translations”, let alone mental translations.

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