

## ***Intercultural Empathy and Egocentric/Other-Centred Translating***

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"All communication is translation," as Steiner reminds us (in Katan 1999). For even when we explain an event to someone using our native language, we end up translating what we mean: we transpose one order of representation into another by turning our mental imagery into verbal concepts in function of our interlocutor's presumed capacity to understand.

If this is so, then interlingual translation may be termed the systematic practice of intercultural communication. The present paper adopts just such a view and uses it to answer four key questions raised in the *Conference announcement*:

1. **"How are we to understand and theorise the experiential role of translation in Language and Intercultural Communication (henceforth, LAIC)?"**
2. **"How should our pedagogic practices develop so as to reflect new theories?"**
3. **"To what extent does our new theorising impact on notions of the nature, quality and accuracy of a translation as traditionally dealt with?"**
4. **"Should translation be a core feature of a LAIC curriculum? What form should it take?"**

Briefly put:

**1. The act of translation is not simply the transposition of lexical items or pragmatic units (speech acts). It is essentially the transposition of existential states.** Good translators "live" a source text as a communicative event by first introjecting the cultural values of the epoch or milieu in which the text was framed. Like actors, they acquire a new identity with every text they live. Translating, then, is, for them, the search for functionally homologous "roles" (existential states) in the target culture -- after, of course, having first introjected the cultural background and expectancies of the (presumed) target public. In rendering this second existential state in the target language, translators create a "translation", i.e., **a target language text capable of producing effects functionally homologous to the ones that the source language text produced on its readers or listeners** (Boylan 1999).

It is clear then that, at its core, the **act of translating** is not centered on a search for "words" so much as on a **search for functionally homologous existential states within the target culture**. Once translators have found such states, they then become authors, not word-transposers. In expressing those states in the target language, their activity closely parallels the creative writing process that the author of the original text undertook within the framework of the source culture -- although, of course, to guide them in their recreation, translators have before them the original text which they may (indeed, *must*) plagiarize to the fullest extent possible.

**2. The pedagogical consequences of this view of the translation process are two:** 1. translators must learn languages, not just as formal systems of representation, but, in particular, as modes of being; 2. translators must learn to be creative writers in the target language they intend to use (generally their native tongue). Both kinds of knowledge may be termed empathetic. For translation -- as all intercultural communication -- is founded on a displacement of the self through empathy.

Traditional university programs for translators generally fail to teach either kind of knowledge: they teach L2 linguistics and the pragmatic interpretation of speech acts (*treated as "texts"*) but ignore

L2 ethnolinguistics and the participant observation of speech acts *lived as events*; moreover, they take for granted that students are naturally competent as creative writers in their native tongue and need no special training (rarely the case). For more on this, see Byram & Fleming, 1998.

### **3. The specific kind of education received tends to produce a specific kind of translator.**

Traditional programs, emphasizing language-as-a-conceptual-system and neglecting creative writing, tend to produce **egocentric translators**, i.e., translators unable to displace themselves into the cultures of the source text and the target public. Egocentric translators reproduce their own experience of a text from within their native cultural framework; moreover, they use words the way they (and not necessarily their presumed readership) react to them. Little wonder that they communicate mostly to themselves.

Instead, the pedagogy indicated in point 2. can help students become **other-centred translators**, capable of the double transformation of consciousness described in point 1. This enables students to communicate the otherness of a text to readers who have cultural/existential backgrounds different from theirs and from that of the author of the text.

**4. Learning to translate professionally constitutes a specialty discipline and should NOT be a core feature of a LAIC curriculum:** it simply requires too much time to become creative in one's L1 and to acquire the tools of the trade (how to create and use glossaries, how to define clients' needs, etc.). On the other hand, a course focused on the core of the translation process -- the equating of existential states -- could be quite useful in a LAIC program. One such course, conducted at the University of Rome III, is described in this paper. Students narrate (in an L2) culturally-connotated real-life events. This means translating their "Italian" experiences into words and imagery that create a homologous effect on a native speaker of English. Success is measured by testing, in real-life encounters organized outside the class, if the observed reactions of native speakers of English, upon hearing or reading the target text, are similar to those of Italians when hearing or reading the original culturally-marked event narrated in the source text.

## Bibliography

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