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Translation

Virtually all linguistic anthropologists acknowledge translation as crucial to their praxis, even that all ethnographic work of sociocultural anthropologists may be interpreted at least metaphorically as translation. Considerably less consensus, however, surrounds the methods and goals by which translations are evaluated and their relations to the larger anthropological project of cross-cultural research specified. Translations fall on a continuum from the literal to the poetic, each extreme having passionate adherents and constituting characteristic linkages between target and source language. This continuum reflects the hybrid, rhizomatic roots of linguistic anthropology across the sciences and humanities.

With a commitment to translation as science, Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and their colleagues constructed a tradition of textual scholarship as the ideal database for both linguistics and ethnology. Texts in the words of native speakers of Native American languages were touted as windows into "the native point of view," the *Weltanschauung* of so-called primitive cultures. This train of thought led Benjamin Whorf, Sapir's student, to explore the interdependence of language, thought and reality. Linguistic relativity, coded in grammatical categories potentially incommensurable with those of familiar Indo-European languages, rendered true bilingualism rare to impossible and translation at best a makeshift affair. Perhaps, indeed, the linguistic habits of first language could never be transcended fully. Yet the Boasians proceeded as if texts were objective, translatable, capable of yielding up insights into the myriad ways of being human.

This Americanist text tradition has been lampooned as mere memory culture, isolated from actual behavior, from ongoing social interaction. Among peoples without writing, however, texts recorded, at least initially, by outsiders have become vehicles of cultural maintenance and revitalization. Ironically, authorship in this collaborative tradition has long been attributed to the translator, although artistry and intellectual property alike reside with the original performer.

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Recent translations, those of Dennis Tedlock being exemplary, emphasize ongoing performative parameters that remain viable in oral traditions across the aboriginal Americas. Ideally, often also in practice, written texts extend and document dialogic and exegetic processes of interpretation inherent in the adaptive capacities of living oral traditions.

Scientific translation of distant languages has sacrificed elegance for ethnographic verisimilitude, foregrounding word-for-word glosses that allow the linguist/reader to reconstruct the grammatical complexity of the original. Textual poetics remains in the original rather than in the translation, understood as a vehicle back to its source. Such a theory of translation often provides a smoother version but this remains secondary, a sop to the faint of heart.

The long-term collaboration of linguist H. C. Wolfart and Plains Cree elder and linguist Freda Ahenakew exemplifies this textual tradition. Extensive cultural background and detailed linguistic notes substitute for readers' lack of memory and indigenous socialization, making Plains Cree oral literature accessible to a wider audience, both Native and non-Native.

Further adaptations of the Americanist text tradition have emerged from conditions of rapid social change, accelerating over the last two hundred years. Many aboriginal languages are endangered, leaving traditional knowledge to be transmitted necessarily in English, an imposed and alien language. Increasing evidence, however, suggests that textual features ranging from phonological to discourse performative are carried over into English, even transmitted to individuals who do not speak a traditional language. My own work with Lisa Valentine over the past decade has explored performance of First Nations identity in the English discourse of Cree, Ojibwe, and Iroquoian communities.

Translation as poetry partially eschews scientific goals of literalism to celebrate the uniqueness of what can be said under particular conditions by particular individuals recognized in virtually every human culture as poets. Translation is utopian, an unattainable goal, a receding target. No translation can be fully adequate. A. L. Becker, following Ortega y Gasset, calls for a "modern philology" in which the exuberances and deficiencies of particular texts, the reciprocal failures of source and target language to replicate one another's distinctions, remain incommensurable. Even with cultural background and linguistic exegesis, a single sentence may retain irreconcilable indeterminacy resolvable only by imposing a coherence absent in the original.

The impossibility of ever settling for a single translation looms large. Douglas Hofstadter structures an entire edifice around multiple translations, his own and those of collaborators across linguistic and cultural background, to (re)create in English potentialities perhaps inherent in a single small poem written in French five centuries ago by one Clement Marot. Nuanced translation is a miniaturist art, for Hofstadter as for Becker.

Although great poets of other Western literary traditions, for example the Hungarian, are translators, writing for audiences expectant that texts in another language will yield to triangulation from multiple translations, each singling out different aspects of the original and creating a unique work in the target language. Despite the number of linguistic anthropologists who

are poets in their own right—from Sapir to Dell Hymes, Dennis Tedlock, and Paul Friedrich—our own literary canon tends inadequately to assume that translators should be invisible.

The Boasian text tradition has emphasized the uniqueness of each linguistic and cultural tradition. More recently, Dell Hymes has pioneered in identifying patterns of repetition and formal structure that are serious candidates for universal features of poetic discourse. Treating formal texts in a variety of oral and written traditions as poetry rather than prose allows translation to focus on form. Canadian poet Robert Bringhurst has been particularly effective in recreating in English the encapsulated intentions and creativity of specific Haida narrators.

Translation reaches deep into the core of anthropological thinking, facilitating what Whorf called "multilingual awareness," the capacity to transcend categories of habitual thought by virtue of knowing how knowledge is codified in a range of languages. Multilingualism and its cross-linguistic analysis lead to a critique of our own society's monolingualism and ethnocentrism. Translation, understood as effective communication, becomes the very key to survival in a global order constructed on local variabilities of expressive capacity and form.

(See also *orality, plagiarism, poetry, reflexivity, relativity, writing*)

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