Translating Culture in Global Times: An Introduction

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Culture, which emerged as a topic in Applied Linguistics with Robert Lado's 1957 classic *Linguistics across cultures. Applied Linguistics for Language teachers*, was seen for many years as a mere adjunct to language, the social context in which language was learned and used. With Kramsch (1981, 1993), language teachers were given an insight into what *language-as-culture* could look like from a discourse perspective—a perspective inspired by the discourse studies of Henry Widdowson (1979, 1984), Michael Moerman's ethnographic strand of conversation analysis (Moerman 1988) and the sociolinguistic insights of Ron and Suzanne Scollon (1981, 1995). This discourse perspective supplemented the intercultural education strand of research that Michael Byram started around that time (Byram 1989; Byram et al. 1994) and that would be later amplified by the work of Karen Risager on languaculture (Risager 2006, 2007: Ch. 7), and Zhu Hua on intercultural communication (2014/2019).

In the last fifteen years, with globalization, and its concomitant mobility of people and capital, its internet and social media, the spread of English as a global language and the breaking down of national boundaries, the interest in culture in Applied Linguistics has given way to an interest in identity and

diversity. But today, with the sudden resurgence of nationalism and populism around the globe, culture is the object of renewed interest with a different relation to language, identity, and diversity.

1. CULTURAL TRANSLATION: A TIMELY CONCEPT FOR APPLIED LINGUISTICS

While Applied Linguistics was re-emerging after World War II as a field of study in the social sciences, drawing from linguistics, psycho- and sociolinguistics (see Li Wei 2011; Mauranen 2015), two other fields were emerging: Translation Studies and Intercultural Communication studies. The first came from literary theory and criticism, rhetoric, philology, and philosophy (Venuti 2000); the second from anthropology, communication studies, and cross-cultural psychology (Zhu Hua 2011). All three fields have this in common that they are linked to language practice: language learning and teaching, professional translation, and communication across cultures, respectively. All three have moved from a formal, structural focus on equivalence in the sixties to an interest in the pragmatic, the functional, and the communicative in the seventies; and since the nineties, all three have reached out to critical cultural theory and post-structuralist theories of meaning that have, to varying degrees, informed their practice.

The concept of cultural translation, vigorously debated in Translation Studies, is new to Applied Linguistics. In her recent book, *What is cultural translation*? (2017), Sarah Maitland argues that the concept comes from a 1985 article by Roger Keesing for the *Journal of Anthropological Research* titled 'Conventional metaphors and anthropological metaphysics: The problematic of cultural translation', in which he warns anthropologists doing fieldwork about the risk of recreating their objects of study in their own image. The 1986 edited volume by James Clifford *Writing Culture* further developed the concept and Homi Bhabha's 1994 *The Location of Culture* provided the theoretical basis for a large body of research in Translation Studies that deals with the issue of cultural translation as a hermeneutic philosophical issue. The term 'cultural translation' there is used in various ways. Sometimes it is used as a metaphor that challenges the traditional binary 'source' and 'target' languages and cultures as discrete categories. Sometimes it is not a linguistic translation strategy *per se* but rather a perspective on the cultural transformations that occur 'in the ideological traffic between language groups' (Sturge cited in Maitland 2017: 17).

In this special issue, the concept of cultural translation is used to denote not only, in a literal sense, the interlingual transfer of meaning between members of different linguistic and cultural communities, but also in a metaphorical, non-linguistic sense, the negotiation of meaning between people with different value systems and different communication cultures. Indeed, it is this second sense of cultural translation that led to the distinction made by Bhabha

between diversity and difference, and to Li Wei's 'translanguaging space' as we discuss below.

2. DIVERSITY VERSUS DIFFERENCE

Before the onset of globalization and with the work of Anthony Giddens (1991) and Homi Bhabha (1994), culture in the nineties was focused on cultural difference, rather than cultural diversity. In particular, the distinction that Bhabha made in his book *The location of culture* (1994) between difference and diversity was born out of a desire to rehabilitate/validate/give a voice to the post-colonial subjects and other subjugated people (women, minorities, etc.) who, in the nineties, were keen on asserting their difference in a postmodern vein (see Judith Butler, Chris Weedon, Homi Bhabha and many others in post-colonial, feminist, and gender studies). These cultural 'politics of recognition' (Taylor 1994) were picked up by Alastair Pennycook and Deborah Cameron, but otherwise very few scholars in Critical Applied Linguistics (see, later Kubota and Lin 2009; McNamara 2012; Kubota 2016).

The challenge for former subjects of colonization, who had been forced to identify with the colonizer and had therefore internalized the split between colonizer and colonized in the very core of their being, was to find a third space from which to claim the right to speak and be listened to. Bhabha explains:

> The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the you. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious (Bhabha 1994: 36)

From this basic feature of verbal communication, Bhabha generalizes to intercultural communication between members of different national communities. The Third Space puts into question:

> the nation as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People. In other words the disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces the narrative of the Western nation which Benedict Anderson so perceptively describes as being written in homogeneous, serial time. (p. 37)

In this view, the subject position of the post-colonial subject in the Third World, who often becomes an immigrant or an ethnic minority in the First World, is a 'contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation'.

> It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity;

> that even the same signs can be *appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew* (p. 37 our emphasis)

For Bhabha, every utterance is already an act of translation because it inserts a dead word from the dictionary into the historical, i.e. the personal timescale, of a living speaker and, in turn, it interpellates the hearer to interpret the utterance in his/her different personal timescale. Thus, those who actively practice intercultural communication

> are caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation…They are now free to negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality of *cultural difference* (p. 38 our emphasis).

While the notion of *difference* stresses the conflictual and ambivalent position of the displaced, the newcomer, or the minority Other, the notion of *diversity* stresses the multicultural nature of globalized societies (praised by political liberals, contested by political conservatives). Difference is a psychoanalytic/semiotic post-modern concept; diversity/superdiversity is a sociological/economic post-structuralist concept. Both are political but in different ways: diversity puts into question the ethnic homogeneity of the nation-state; difference goes further and puts into question the very idea of a historically stable national culture. With the fast spreading globalization of the last twenty years, and the recent recrudescence of nationalism, diversity has become the catchword of the present times with its various entailments: social networks, multilingualism, and a neoliberal discourse of sustainable economic growth. In contrast, difference, that draws attention to symbolic power, conflict and incommensurability, and that advocates hybridity and in-between-ness, is often seen today as either naively idealistic, or as threatening to a global world order that seeks to unite the planet and ensure its survival.

For example, many Applied Linguists interested in post-structuralism (Pavlenko 2002; Norton 2013; Douglas Fir Group 2016) draw on such post-modern authors as Chris Weedon (1987) and Anthony Giddens (1991) but do not adopt their post-modernist orientation. They have veered the field toward post-structuralist diversity (multiple identities), not post-modern difference (different subject positions and different membership categorizations) (Kramsch 2013).

The papers in this special issue dramatize the issue of diversity versus difference. Juliane House considers how difference can be addressed by the cultural filter of covert translation. Claire Kramsch shows that in some foreign language classes native teachers' attempts to have the students engage with difference are hampered by institutional constraints. Zhu Hua et al. document how karate's Japaneseness, i.e. cultural difference, is performed, imagined, and mobilized in favor of diversity. For Jennifer Johnson, the use of cochlear implants eliminates (as opposed to mediates) the third space of intimacy between hearing mothers and their deaf children. In Joseph Park's paper, we see how the management of diversity at a Singaporean workplace sequesters

Korean workers under the guise of respecting their difference. And David Gramling's paper vividly demonstrates how the algorithms developed by the computer industry manage global multiplicity and diversity by eliminating, not grappling with, difference. In all these cases, global technologies work not so much to bridge as to eradicate cultural difference and to return us to structuralist views of language and quantitatively measurable diversity with the exception of the case in House's paper where indigenous discourse norms are found to be (still) resistant to the Anglophone norms gaining ground through translation.

3. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AS TRANSLATION

The current confusion about the nature of culture is due only in part to the rise of global means of communication and the global mobility that have multiplied access to speakers of different languages and that have fragmented and diversified people's ways of belonging. It is also due to what has been called the 'culture wars' within democratic societies that speak the same national language, but react differently to the neoliberal culture of globalization within and outside their borders. All these upheavals call for 'translation'—not only the linguistic translation of texts, as among the 28 states of the European Union, but the translation of sociocultural and political beliefs and ideologies. Such a translation has been called cultural, because it involves group perceptions, values, and beliefs. It could also be called political because it has to engage in the symbolic power struggles over meaning in the shifting use of names, categories, brands and other 'hidden persuaders' in verbal landscapes saturated by both traditional and social media.

In the field of Translation Studies, the distinction has been made, in particular by Juliane House (2009), between overt and covert translation (a critique of theoretical dichotomies in exploring 'natural' equivalence in translation can be found in Cook 2010; Pym 2014). In overt translation, House writes, 'intercultural transfer is explicitly present and so likely to be perceived by recipients. They are presented with aspects of the foreign culture dressed in their own language, and are thus invited to enter into an intercultural dialogue' (House 2009: 71–72). Such is the case, for example, in the traditional meaning of translation, where a text in one language is translated into the vocabulary of another language while doing justice to both the source and the target cultures; or when, for example, the author of an original English text inserts non-English words and phrases referring to cultural practices, conventions or phrases for *couleur locale* or exotic effect, as we see in the works of Hemingway for Spanish or Nabokov for Russian.

Quite different is the effect of covert translation, where 'intercultural perception has been absorbed by the translator but denied to the recipients of the translation.' (p. 71). As House explains, 'many translators now see themselves as interculturally active and socially and politically committed communicators. They 'demand a shift of focus from texts as legitimate objects of study in

themselves to the historical and social contexts that constrain their production and reception' (p. 73). They feel responsible for revealing sociocultural and political differences and inequalities, translating for example 'Judaea and Samaria' as 'Occupied Palestine', 'security fence' into 'apartheid wall', and 'Islamist terrorists' as 'freedom fighters'. At issue is 'the perception of the translator as mediator or intercultural communicator' (p. 74). The papers in this issue seek to explore what implications these theoretical models of translation and new ways of understanding cultural translation have for the field of Applied Linguistics.

4. TRANSLATING CULTURE THROUGH TRANSLANGUAGING

Homi Bhabha's concept of Third Space has been evoked recently by Li Wei, who has proposed an ambitious theory of 'translanguaging' to explain the semiotic crossings we observe in bi- and multilingual individuals between different linguistic and cultural systems of meaning. For Li Wei translanguaging is not only switching and integrating codes and modes (Garcia 2009; Canagarajah 2013; Garcia and Li 2014), but creating new hybrid meanings through a combination of various symbolic systems.

> Translanguaging is not simply going between different linguistic structures, cognitive and semiotic systems and modalities, but going beyond them. A Translanguaging Space allows language users to integrate social spaces (and thus 'linguistic codes') that have been formerly separated through different practices in different places... The act of Translanguaging creates a social space for the language user by bringing together different dimensions of their personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, belief and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity, into one coordinated and meaningful performance (Li Wei 2011a: 1223). And this Translanguaging Space has its own transformative power because it is forever ongoing and combines and generates new identities, values and practices. (Li Wei 2018)

Translanguaging has been hailed as opening up a 'transformative' space in which new meanings can be generated that defy monolingual and monocultural identities and provides hybrid forms of identification that are more in tune with our globalized online/offline existence. However, as the papers in this special issue show, translanguaging can be used not only as a personal space of liberation but as a political strategy of colonization as well. Juliane House's example of covert translation for ideological purposes is a case in point. In Zhu Hua et al.'s paper karate, originally developed in an island outside Japan and transformed into a Japanese martial arts in the 1900s, has been hybridized into a multilingual multicultural character-building practice colonized by a consumer culture that uses Japaneseness as mythic foil (Barthes 1957). Johnson shows how cochlear implants are translated from a mere hearing technology to an indispensable access to the social, economic and

educational opportunities offered by the dominant consumer culture. Park's example of Korean workers in multinational companies in Singapore is a dramatic illustration of the dark side of cultural translanguaging, that reproduces colonial practices in the name of global diversity.

5. TRANSLATING CULTURE AS ETHICAL PRACTICE

Whether as an overt or a covert process, translation raises ethical questions that are all the more urgent as translation is never just the work of one translator, who takes sole responsibility for his/her work, or of one mediator with a well-intended political agenda, but in an era of global communication networks it becomes a much more subtle and anonymous process of interpenetration and hybridity of discourse styles, viewpoints, and ideologies. A word like 'diversity' itself does not need to be translated any more in the overt or even covert sense of the term (Sanneh 2017); it gets redefined to suit powerful ideological or political interests. For example, as Bäri Williams noted recently, while computer companies like Apple still adopt the discourse of affirmative action that is meant to redress prior discrimination, 'some come to believe that any kind of diversity—including cognitive diversity—must be equally valuable.' And indeed, Apple has been arguing that diversity can also be understood as 'bringing a different life experience and life perspective to the conversation.' But as Williams forcefully argues, 'that means that the most meaningful ways through which this [difference] is formed (cultural, religious, sexual orientation, socioeconomic, ability and especially gender and racial differences) may be forgotten'. And she adds: 'While cognitive diversity and viewpoint diversity are important, I worry that [companies] will adjust the definition of diversity so that, conveniently, it's already achieved.' (Williams 2017). We see quite clearly the ethical challenges presented by such redefinitions or translanguaging in Park's and Gramling's papers (this issue). As Joseph Park shows, when in multinational corporations the cultural diversity of the workforce is understood as a resource for maximizing profit, culture is viewed as a commodity that gets managed and translanguaged as such. And, as David Gramling argues, the efforts by computer scientists to develop totally translatable and multilingually 'controlled meanings' raise serious ethical questions for language educators and Applied Linguists. Viewing these meanings as so many 'highly valued commodities that commercial, governmental, and private consumers vie to operationalize' problematizes the very nature of our object of study, namely human language itself.

6. OUTLINE OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue is a spin-off from the colloquium of the same title at AILA World Congress in Rio 2017 and took inspiration from the Translating Cultures programme by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the UK. The papers all grapple with issues of diversity and the translation of experience

across social and cultural domains, whether as overt, covert or translanguaging processes and they explore the impact of global information and communication technologies on these processes. The first paper by Juliane House lays the ground for understanding the process of translation itself. The four subsequent papers by Kramsch, Zhu Hua et al., Johnson and Park examine four different sites where cultural translation forms the core of the activity under study: foreign language classrooms in California, a karate club in London, a family with the deaf child of a hearing mother in the USA, and the workplace of a multinational corporation in Singapore. They each deal with the commodification of language and the attempts to make untranslatable experiences translatable across cultural boundaries. Even though language teachers, karate club owners, hearing technology manufacturers, and multinational corporations attempt to break down these boundaries through various means: the use of a common global language (Kramsch; Zhu Hua et al.), cochlear implants (Johnson), or diversity management techniques (Park), there is always an untranslatable residue that reveals unbridgeable cultural differences. The sixth paper, by David Gramling discusses the futuristic vision of the computer industry currently building algorithms of perfect and total translatability across languages. In the Commentaries section which serves as a coda, all the contributors were invited to reflect on the main theme of this special issue and to enter into dialogue with one another.

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