

THE TRANSLATOR AS AN AGENT OF POWER

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Abstract: The paper analyses the presence of the translator's voice, the interference between the translator and the text (s)he translates. The paper explores the possibility the translator has to include or exclude the reader in the translated text.

1. Aim of the paper

This paper looks at translating as a process or at translation assessment from the perspective of the concept of 'power'. Power may be defined in several ways, as political, economic or social power, as the power to manipulate or to shape opinions, the power to induce action, the power to refrain from taking action, aso. The sense that I have in mind for the purpose of this paper involves using language in order to 'include' or to 'exclude' a particular kind of reader, a certain system of values, a set of beliefs or an entire culture. Sometimes, and it is rather obvious when we look at the bulk of literary translations into Romanian, especially over the last 10-15 years, all translated texts sound alike, as if they had been written by one writer and translated by one and the same translator. Indeed, this may be explained in terms of translation imposing its own constraints on the kind of language used in translation. But, in power terms, it can also mean that somewhere, somehow there is some exclusion of a reader, who is forced to read in a particular way, exclusion of an author committed to oblivion or exclusion of a translator condemned to be invisible. Such exclusion is a sign of the translator's power to use the language efficiently, almost in a clinical way so as to invite a particular kind of reading. The translator takes this course of action in the interest of 'readability' and more often than not resorts to (a) cohesion by lexical variation (as opposed to repetition), (b) over-simplicity of syntax or (c) excessively explicit connectivity to signal text structure more transparently.

The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that the translator has a voice, that the translator is a 'discursive presence', as Theo Hermans (1999) puts it. In Herman's opinion the translator's voice is always present and it may manifest itself (1) because of temporal or geographical distance from the ST, or (2) in 'self-referential' texts marked by puns or (3) in cases of 'contextual overdetermination' where a complex chain of identification may lead to omissions from the text or explanations in footnotes. In fact, it is only the ideology of translation, the illusion of transparency and coincidence, the illusion of the one voice of the author that blinds us to the presence of the translator's voice.

In fact, there is a permanent interaction between the translator's power to include or exclude and the presence of his voice, especially when we think of translation as a form of rewriting, the more so as translating involves an interpretation of the ST to make the translated text more accessible to the target reader, in the context of the target culture. Obviously, rewriting can be viewed as a form of manipulation, as a way for one culture to assert its power over the other culture by means of translation. The translator's power to manipulate the text is generally viewed as a negative action because it is understood as a way to interfere with the author's style, voice, presence. Nevertheless, what the translator should do is not allow himself to be tempted by the power he can exercise over the ST.

The demonstration is based on two texts on the same topic written by two different authors. The two texts were written prior to Pope Benedict's XVI visit to Istanbul by an European clergyman – father Richard John Neuhaus – and a Muslim residing in Britain – Tariq

Ramadan, a research fellow at Oxford. They were both published by *Time*, in November 2007.

2. Analysis of the two texts

The two texts to be analyzed were written prior to the Pope's visit to Turkey, but following the speech he delivered on September 12, 2007 in Germany, in which he quoted a 14th century Byzantine Emperor who made a number of unpleasant remarks about Islam. The Pope's speech caused violent reactions within the Muslim world, almost as violent as the Prophet's caricatures published by the Danish papers. Nevertheless the stance adopted by the two authors is different, given their origin, education, mentality and faith, irrespective of the fact that they are both intellectuals. Both of them mention the idea of violence, which becomes a central issue in both articles, yet seen from different perspectives. When faced with these two texts, the translator may feel tempted to exercise his power of exclusion to 'sanitize', to 'sterilize' the texts to make them more palatable to the readers of the TL. At the same time, the translator might exercise his power of exclusion not to sterilize the texts but to make them more forceful. I shall endeavor to demonstrate that the translator can do both, depending on the choices he makes when translating the text.

As I have already stated, the author of the first text is a Christian clergyman, whose perception of the Pope's visit to Istanbul carries the mark of his Christian education and faith. It is visible from the very first line of the article where he refers to the city of Istanbul calling it "formerly Constantinople" as clear indication that his mental image of the city the Pope is going to visit is that of the city of Constantine, emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, who adopted Christianity as the official state religion. The two names of the city as set in opposition to mark the clear-cut distinction the author of the article makes between the two cities and the fact that the Pope was going to visit not so much an important Muslim landmark but an glorious Christian landmark. It is, in fact, the very first moment when the translator can make a show of power as he/she can decide to eliminate the reference to Constantinople, thus excluding the author and the reader, but making his voice quite heard.

Let us take a look at the second paragraph of the first text:

- (1) *Although the West, and most notably Europe, may be less Christian today, Muslims still view it as the Christian West. For a thousand years, from the days of Muhammad in the 7th century, Islam enjoyed a run of triumphant conquest, interrupted only momentarily by the Christian Crusades. The time of conquest lasted until the failed siege of Vienna in 1683. After Vienna, and most dramatically under 19th and 20th century Western colonialism, Islam was sidelined from history--one of the main sources of the rage and resentment of today's jihadists.*

When translating the translator may choose to eliminate the modal *may* in the first clause and the adverb *still* in the second clause, thus excluding the author and making his voice more audible. Such deletions may seem unimportant, but if we take a look at a possible translation of this first sentence into Romanian, we shall immediately notice the difference in meaning and attitude.

- (2) a. *Deși în zilele noastre creștinismul este mai puțin pregnant în Occident și mai ales în Europa, musulmanii îl consideră Occidentul creștin.*

- b. *Deși este posibil ca în zilele noastre creștinismul să fie mai puțin pregnant în Occident și mai ales în Europa, musulmanii continuă să-l considere Occidentul creștin.*

The first variant uses the simple present tense which give the sentence a generic value, while, in the second variant the presence of the modality triggers the use of the subjunctive which makes the sentence non-factive, therefore more tentative and less dramatic.

The next two sentences of the second paragraph narrate almost one thousand years of European history seen as a clash between two civilisations – Christianity and Islam, with Islam the victor throughout most of that period. These two sentences are contrasted with the last sentence of the paragraph which stresses that in no more than 300 years the Christian West managed to do away with the power and influence of Islam. The contrast is underlined by the choice of the vocabulary used by the author – “enjoyed a run of triumphant conquest”, “interrupted only momentarily”, “the failed siege of Vienna”, “most dramatically under the 19th and 20th century Western Colonialism”. The translator may change all that by the mere power he has to intervene in the text and rewrite it.

- (3) a. *Timp de o mie de ani, încă din sec.al VII-lea, de pe vremea lui Mohamed, Islamul a avut o perioadă de cuceriri, întrerupte doar de cruciadele creștine. Perioada acesta s-a încheiat o dată cu respingerea asediului Vienei în 1683. Apoi, mai ales în sec. al XIX-lea și al XX-lea, colonialismul occidental a marginalizat Islamul – acesta fiind în prezent una dintre sursele de resentimente ale jihadiștilor.*
- b. *Timp de o mie de ani, încă din sec.al VII-lea, de pe vremea lui Mohamed, Islamul s-a bucurat de o perioadă de cuceriri trimfătoare, întrerupte doar pentru scurt timp de cruciadele creștine. Cuceririle au continuat până la respingerea asediului Vienei în 1683. După momentul Viena,și cu atât mai evident în sec. al XIX-lea și al XX-lea, colonialismul occidental a trecut Islamul pe linia moartă a istoriei – acesta fiind în prezent una dintre principalele sursele de furie și resentimente ale jihadiștilor.*

Variant (3a) is a sanitized version which aims at neutralizing the contrast created by the author in the ST, while variant (3b) somehow stresses the contrast only as a result of the choices made by the translator, of his power to control and exclude.

What follows in the first text is the author’s attempt to demonstrate that the quotation made by the Pope in his September 2006 speech is still true, that Islam goes hand in hand with violence, that Islam is in fact trying to conquer the Christian world again by resorting to two methods, namely massive Muslim immigration to the West and the violent reconquest of the West (terrorist attacks, suicide bombers, and the like, as a full-fledged war no longer seems possible). Depending on his intention (to make the TT more neutral, less passionate, less biased or to make it even more forceful than it is) the translator may exclude the author and his beliefs or he may reinforce the author’s beliefs by including his own voice (obviously if his voice is louder than the author’s).

The second text is written by a Muslim scholar (Tariq Ramadan) who also starts from the speech the Pope delivered in September 2006. Apparently, the first paragraph is an objective rendition of a situation during which a Roman Catholic (be it the Pope) expressed a personal opinion with respect to Islam. Let us have a look at the first paragraph and see whether a translator can exercise his power to exclude the author or include his own voice.

- (4) *Since delivering the speech in which he quoted a 14th century Emperor who said the Prophet of Islam had given nothing positive to humanity and had commanded followers to*

use violence to spread their faith, Pope Benedict XVI has been subjected to bitter Muslim reaction around the world. Benedict has responded by saying he regretted the consequences of his misunderstood words, but he did not retract his statement--perhaps rightly so. After all, he had simply cited an ancient Emperor. It is Benedict's right to exercise his critical opinion without being expected to apologize for it--whether he's an ordinary Roman Catholic or the Pope.

Consider next the two possible translations:

- (5) a. *De când a rostit discursul în care cita spusele unui împărat din sec. al XIV-lea care a spunea că Profetul nu a dat nimic pozitiv omenirii și le-a poruncit urmașilor săi să-și răspândească credința prin violență, Papa Benedict al XVI-lea a fost tinta unor reacții negative din partea musulmanilor din toată lumea. Ca răspuns, Benedict a declarat că regretă consecințele cuvintelor sale greșit înțelese, dar nu și-a retras declarația, pe bună dreptate poate. De fapt nu a făcut decât să citeze un împărat de demult. Benedict are dreptul de a-și exprima o opinie critică fără să se aștepte cineva să-și ceară scuze pentru acest lucru, fie el un catolic obișnuit sau Papa.*
- b. *De când a rostit discursul în care cita spusele unui împărat din sec. al XIV-lea care spunea că Profetul Islamului nu a dăruit nimic pozitiv omenirii ci le-a poruncit urmașilor săi să-și răspândească credința prin sabie, Papa Benedict al XVI-lea a fost supus atacurilor furioase ale musulmanilor din toată lumea. Benedict a reacționat declarând că regretă consecințele cuvintelor sale greșit înțelese, dar nu și-a retras declarația, poate pe bună dreptate. De fapt Benedict nu a făcut decât să citeze un împărat de demult și are dreptul de a-și exprima o opinie critică fără să se aștepte cineva să-și ceară scuze pentru acest lucru, fie el un catolic obișnuit sau Papa.*

The tone of the ST is quite moderate, the author tries to seem objective, or at least in the first paragraph. Depending on the choices made by the translator, the author's attempt to objectivity may become more (variant 3 a) or less visible (variant 3 b).

Unlike the Christian writer, the Muslim scholar refers to the definition of European identity given by Pope Benedict, namely Christian by faith and Greek by reason, definition which he considers "deeply troubling and potentially dangerous" because, in his opinion, it ignores "the critical role that Muslims played in the development of Western thought". This case of oblivion is seen as a cause of the reaction Muslims have against Europe. He moves the plane of the discussion from the actual battle field to a confrontation of ideas. Let's have a look at paragraph 3 of this text.

- (6) *As I have written before, this profoundly European Pope is inviting the people of his continent to become aware of the central, inescapable character of Christianity within their identity, or risk losing it. That may be a legitimate goal, but Benedict's narrow definition of European identity is deeply troubling and potentially dangerous. This is what Muslims must respond to: the tendency of Westerners to ignore the critical role that Muslims played in the development of Western thought. Those who "forget" the decisive contributions of rationalist Muslim thinkers like al-Farabi (10th century), Avicenna (11th century), Averroes (12th century), al-Ghazali (12th century), ash-Shatibi (13th century) and Ibn Khaldun (14th century) are reconstructing a Europe that is not only an illusion but also self-deceptive about its past.*

In my opinion the presence or absence, in the translated variant, of the words that I have underlined may enhance or play down the tone and voice of the author.

- (7) a. *După cum am arătat deja, acest Papă european îi invită pe europenii săi să conștientizeze rolul central al creștinismului în definirea identității proprii pentru a nu o pierde. Poate că este îndreptățit s-o facă, dar definiția dată de Benedict identității europene este tulburătoare și periculoasă. Iată provocarea căreia trebuie să-i răspundă musulmanii – tendința occidentalilor de a nu recunoaște rolul crucial jucat de musulmani în dezvoltarea gândiri occidentale. Cei care nu-și aduc aminte de contribuția importantă a gânditorilor musulmani raționaliști precum al-Farabi (sec. al X-lea), Avicenna (sec. al XI-lea), Averroes (sec. al XII-lea), al-Ghazali (sec. al XII-lea), ash-Shatibi (sec. al XIII-lea) și Ibn Khaldun (sec. al XIV-lea) sunt pe cale de a reface un trecut al unei Europe care nu este decât o iluzie.*
- b. *După cum am arătat deja, acest Papă european îi invită pe europeni să conștientizeze rolul central, ineluctabil al creștinismului în profund definirea identității proprii pentru a nu o pierde. Poate că este îndreptățit s-o facă, dar definiția limitată dată de Benedict identității europene este deosebit de tulburătoare și posibil periculoasă. Iată provocarea căreia trebuie să-i răspundă musulmanii – tendința occidentalilor de a ignora rolul crucial jucat de musulmani în dezvoltarea gândiri occidentale. Cei care „uită” contribuția decisivă a gânditorilor musulmani raționaliști precum al-Farabi (se.al X-lea), Avicenna (sec.al XI-lea), Averroes (sec.al XII-lea), al-Ghazali (sec.al XII-lea), ash-Shatibi (sec.al XIII-lea) și Ibn Khaldun (sec.al XIV-lea) sunt pe cale de a reface un trecut al unei Europe care nu este decât o iluzie, o dovadă de orbire.*

Depending on the choices the translator makes, he can have the author speak in a louder or more muffled voice. His choices depend on the stance he adopts as to the content of the text he translates. Such a position can be the translator's own election or it may have been commissioned by the user of the translation.

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References

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