

Book reviews

Locating the 'missing link'? Not quite

Translation and Identity

Michael Cronin

Routledge: London and New York, 2006.

Translation Studies scholar Michael Cronin's recent book *Translation and Identity* is set against the background of contemporary world, based on certain assumptions, and demands the readers to share them as they sail through the book. Some of these assumptions are that that we are living in a globalised world; today identity has taken centre stage of various political struggles and is the important category with which we make sense of the contemporary world; in the globalised context it is difficult for the formation and continuance of a particular identity; identity is primarily formed around languages and issues arising out of the question of identity lead to extremely violent conflicts. It is in this assumed context that Cronin tries to situate translation as the 'missing link' between the 'local' and 'global', and according to him, '[translation] must be at the centre of any attempt to think about the question of identity in human society.' He also entrusts translators and thinkers about translation the obligation, 'to engage with debates about how in our century we are to find ways to live together in our households and in our cities and in our world.'

This rather jargon-free and small book which runs to 166 pages is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, *Translation and the new cosmopolitan*, Cronin advances a new concept of cosmopolitanism, 'micro-cosmopolitanism' which is a 'cosmopolitanism from below', and is sensitive to and recognises 'differences' within the local/particular not as essentialist but as fluid. Conceptualising the translation phenomenon as 'global hybrid' and 'mutable mobile', Cronin views the history of translation as essentially transnational. Further he argues for the centrality of

literature and translation to think about any cultural policy for a transnational institution like the European Union.

Cronin's appeal here to include literary translations in the national curriculum and to consider translation as a phenomenon happening 'within the language' deserves attention, but his rather conclusive statement on the history of translation that 'that historical research into translation points to whether at a microscopic or macroscopic level in many instances it is the permanent quantum duality of the cultural experience that is the norm rather than homogenous national or imperial continuum occasionally disrupted by foreign adventures,' (p. 26) is problematic precisely because it neglects the fact that translation was instrumental in perpetuating colonial power (Niranjana 1992). And he alludes to the romantic 'small is beautiful' view to look at 'local' as small, equal and ideal units in a rush to push the 'micro-cosmopolitan' concept.

Chapter 2, *Translation and migration*, is an attempt to look at the phenomenon of migration in the contemporary society as translation, and migrants as 'translated beings'. Here Cronin advances the concept of interculturalism as against multiculturalism which according to him can be achieved through translation accommodation rather than translation assimilation, the former being an instance where the migrant retains her or his source culture/language as they translate themselves into the target culture/language. The notion of conceiving translation as intrinsic rather than extrinsic echoes some of the points already made in chapter 1. The last part of the chapter deals with the limitations of the notion of citizenship as laid out by the ideals of liberal democracy in the contemporary world and tries to show how translation can be used to address this dilemma.

One of the major limitations of the arguments made in this chapter which deals with the issue of migration is that the author, quite comfortably, completely ignores the very mobile/migratory

nature of capital itself, which is the most striking feature of globalisation.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the book is chapter 3, *Interpreting identity*, which deals with the notion of interpretation as translation. Here the author tries to explore the 'aspects of identity in the practice of interpreting'. The practice of interpretation, being more of an oral act demands not just the audibility but also the visibility of the interpreters making them what Cronin calls 'embodied agents'. Cronin provides some interesting historical and present-day accounts of violent conflicts where the interpreters' role is not just crucial but often becomes fatal for themselves due to the question of identity of the interpreter, as, in the author's words, 'the message and the messenger become one'.

But here Cronin hopelessly falls back on the works of Shakespeare in an attempt to 'track an intra-textual translation presence', which is to look at what literary texts have to say about translation, in the context of 'the practice of translation and interpreting in sixteenth- and early seventeenth century England and Ireland.' The point of contention here is not about looking at translation in this way, which itself is illuminating, but Shakespeare as a source, or context. Maybe we should look for new literary sources and sites to talk about translation with the help of .

In the final chapter, *The future of diversity*, Cronin advocates a 'negentropic translational perspective' towards culture which is concerned with 'the way in which translation contributes to and fosters the persistence and development of diversity'. There is a recurrent argument here for 'diversality' and diversity within the 'local' by invoking the notions of 'micro-cosmopolitanism' and 'bottom up localisation' and the vitality of translation to make sense of the contemporary world.

Elsewhere in this chapter Cronin takes a look at the contemporary Indian scenario, drawing on the work of Francesca Orsini, where in spite of the rich literary traditions of its various

regional languages, they face ‘pressure’ from English in India. The author does it to show how being ‘bereft of translators or opportunities for translation can affect the wider “literariness” of a language’ even though it has huge number of users and rich literary tradition. The author stops his investigation there and refuses to move further to find why there is a situation which is ‘bereft of translators and less opportunities for translations’, and whenever he does he conveniently blames it on the nation-state.

In Cronin’s own words, ‘one of the recurrent themes of [this book] is the constant interaction between global and local’ and he tries to locate translation at the centre of this interaction as the ‘missing link’ between the two. But throughout the book, the author appears to be obsessed with ‘local’ and almost neglects and refuses to engage with the ‘global’, the major blind spot of this book is this.

The persuasiveness of Cronin’s argument for the centrality he seeks for translation to grapple with the question of identity, one of the most contentious issues of contemporary society, can at best be considered as a strategy to draw the attention of both the public and academia into translation, a much neglected but nevertheless a fascinating and promising area of study.

REFERENCE

Niranjana, T. 1992 **Siting Translation: History, Post structuralism, and the Colonial Context** Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

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Theories on the Move: Translation's Role in the Travels of Literary Theories

Sebnem Susam-Sarajeva

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When we read theory translated from a different language, very often we pay attention primarily to the formulations of the theorist with perhaps a cursory glance at the name of the translator. In the intensity with which we plunge into the text, we seldom remind ourselves that the text is a translation. We do not ask how and why theories are translated. In a useful reminder, Sebnem Susam-Sarajeva's book draws our attention to the "role translation plays in the migration of literary and cultural theories across linguistic and cultural borders, and across power differentials." Migration is a complex phenomenon that contends with the problematic of location; when we recognize that translation is itself a form of migration, the implications for the author of the source-text, the re-location of the text, and the reader in the new language cannot be ignored. It is then, Sebnam argues, important to study the indicative and the formative role that translation plays.

In her multiple-case study of migration of literary theory from France to Turkey and France to Anglo-America, she tells how Roland Barthes and Hélène Cixous travelled their different ways. And so, the tenor of the argument is set up to orient the discussion towards theory travelling through languages in translation. Her task then is to address the question "how does theory travel, what may be the relationship of theory to translation in particular cases, and what happens when theory travels in various directions for different audiences?" In addressing these questions, the power differentials in relationships across cultural, linguistic, and political borders are underscored especially within a postcolonial or neocolonial context. Once this is set up, she draws out the inadequacy of postcolonial

theorizing for the study that concerns itself with a variety of power differentials that are not addressed in the available postcolonial discourse: "...what about all those languages and cultures of the countries which have never been a colony – which might have even been centres of empires themselves in the past, as in the case of Turkey – but are now nevertheless under the profound influence of hegemonic powers economically, politically and culturally?"

The discussion of Barthes and Cixous in their new cultural abode is within the framework of descriptive Translation Studies and systems theory which elaborates how theories travel. This is done by first presenting the underlying contexts of the reception of structuralism and semiotics in Turkey and French feminism in Anglo-America. The discussion of the issue of importation of structuralism and semiotics in Turkey, and French feminism in Anglo-America is particularly relevant in the specific context of India and in the larger context of translating theory for it highlights assumptions and misconceptions on theory, the politics of cultural transfer in importation, power equations, and agency, as the text dwells on the discussions and debates in the intellectual circles in the receiving languages. A very perceptive analysis of the different trajectories of the mode of critical thinking in Turkey and France and of the women's movement in France and Anglo-America brings out specific differences between systems of thinking, be it in the debate on form versus content, objective versus subjective in Turkey, or essentialism and biologism, and indebtedness to white fathers in Cixous.

Sebnem also underlines the differences between the two contexts in hand for she recognizes that "imports do not contribute to the shaping of local discourses to the same extent in every destination." The attitudinal differences in the mode of reception in the receiving system identify issues of alterity, solidarity, and universality in the case of Cixous while tropes of alterity, lack and lag are identified in the case of Barthes. An important insight here

has to do with the nature of the relationship import / export entails: “A one-way import / export relationship does not necessarily imply a passive reception of whatever comes through the linguistic borders. Imported discursive elements *are* transformed even in what may be called ‘defective’, ‘deficient’ or ‘weak’ systems.” In other words, the receiving system has other intentions beyond the structure of the source system.

In this context, it is sound argument that the reception of the works of the two French thinkers was influenced by the general response to the respective schools of thought. Appropriately enough, we read that the translation and reception of the works constructs also long-lasting image of the writers. I find the discussion of the “monolithic images” of Barthes and Cixous in the imported culture very forceful not just for the argument but for the methodology that locates translation within an exhaustive framework of what gets translated when and by whom. “Images do not stay the same forever;” the book traces a fascinating history of the changes in the image that Barthes and Cixous have in their new languagescapes. This study of the endurance of images attests to the “domesticating power of translation regardless of the power differentials involved between the source and receiving systems.”

Given the power relation between source and receiving systems, the whole question of retranslation becomes important. While the study recognizes that imports do not shape local discourses across the board, it is substantiated further by arguing that “the factors of dominance, elasticity, tolerance and power of the source and receiving systems involved determine whether travelling theory will be granted multiple-entry visa into the latter system through retranslations.” Different types of retranslation theory which are largely linear are discussed. Five arguments are presented on the topic touching on the issue of canonicity, ageing translations, the struggles in the receiving system, the needs and attitudes of the receiving system, and non-existence of retranslations. We get a

fascinating glimpse of the history of Barthes' multiple entries in Turkey with the important digression on Turkish Language Reform. Cixous in Anglo-America is an instance of "rarity of retranslations" which is very significant. For, this "confirms the 'deproblematization' of translation in the Anglo-American feminist critical system." Apart from the insights one gets on the power play within feminist discourse and retranslation, I recommend the sections on *jouissance* and *écriture féminine* in chapters 5 and 6 to those who grapple with French thought.

A discussion of multiple-entry or being rooted home has to reckon with the politics of the systems involved. And so, "Both structuralism and semiotics in Turkey and French feminism in Anglo-America were taken to task for being apolitical, elitist, and unsuitable for the purposes of the ongoing local struggles." The text establishes here that theory and practice continue to be polarized which was largely the reason for the reception of the two writers in the respective systems.

The conclusion neatly sums up a theory for travelling theory. Theories travel and remain travellers, "aliens in the middle of curious, disapproving, friendly, suspicious or downright hostile locals....Translated theories continue to be perceived as foreign imports, unless they occasionally become 'transferred' cultural products." The text rightly reminds us that theory travels. Translation is also a form of migration. For all the rigorous research and tightly knit argument, the text reminds us about the body that enables such travel. Migrations to different systems, different bodies of thought are always through people. This is where theory is redeemed from mere 'sightseeing' and gets comprehended.

Sebnam's book is a remarkable journey that addresses cultural questions that concern the entry of theories in translation into a particular system. The book illustrates how important it is not to ignore the medium as much as the mode of transport of theories.

For, that is where we get to the context, history, and what theory sets out to ‘remember’ in the receiving system.

I have found useful openings here to do theory in the literature classroom. There is a method here to study how theory travels though the tropes one finds could be different in other systems. This book opens up a large area of inquiry for Translation Studies in India. A study that locates theories that have migrated to India in English or into regional languages in the country emerges as a distinct research possibility. In spite of advanced technology, how did three spelling errors creep into the book? *Theories on the Move* is a very useful book for budding researchers, and translators.

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