

Language Acts and Worldmaking Debates

Translation as Creative Writing

Introduction

I want to argue that translation is no longer an add-on to language learning. It is absolutely central to intercultural languaging and should therefore play an important part in language pedagogy. Rather than looking to linguistics or cultural studies to structure my reflections on language learning, I turn to the discipline of philosophy for a way of thinking about the place of language learners and learning in today's world. Nomadic philosophy provides the key concepts. In the time allotted to me, I will sketch in the philosophical underpinnings, explain the focus on translation and give an impression of my classroom experimentation.

Why translation?

This is no reversion to the Latin-based model of language learning which, surprisingly, is still in use in some university language departments. In the new pedagogy I am proposing, translation enables a dynamic and creative approach to a new language and culture, so that translation is more of a creative encounter with a text than a mere matter of knowledge of grammar and lexis combined with stylistic competence. Elsewhere (Ch. 2 of *Nomadic Literature*) I have also argued that the translator is the embodiment of a nomadic sensibility, basing this idea on the work of Michael Cronin, especially *Across the Lines: Travel, Language Translation* (2000) and the philosophical ideas of Gilles Deleuze and Rosi Braidotti. Such a nomadic sensibility is characterized by an openness to new languages and cultures which gives rise to a more fluid, multiple subjectivity – or identity, which is perhaps the more everyday term for our sense of ourselves.

The nomad is the central figure which can be elaborated in order to think about:

- life as a process of which change and mobility are fundamentals
- a movement away from stable identities
- 'becoming' as the fundamental mode of being of a subject who is therefore multiple

- language as deterritorialised so that it becomes possible for a subject to carry a linguistic dwelling-place with them.

I am not talking about a rootless vagabond, but rather someone who has a clear sense of belonging and learns to create their own map of the languages and cultures they encounter. The nomad/translator can be taken as a figuration for the language learner.

Literature?!

At the risk of sounding as though my aim is to smuggle in yet another mainstay of the traditional curriculum, creative works such as poetry, plays and stories – literature in other words - can inspire learners at all levels to discover the new language in an active way through transposition to their own language(s).

The principles for this kind of translation teaching are:

- There is no such thing as ‘le mot juste’ or the right or correct translation
- The act of translation is fleeting and reflects the student’s reading of the text at that moment
- A phenomenological, superficial approach to reading is required
- Multiple translations – either by one student, or by several students comparing versions – are the most revealing of a text’s richness.
- In addition to written translations, performed translations are equally desirable.
- The inherently collaborative, multiplicitous approach invites use of social media.

For brief examples of this approach in practice, see my article ‘Signs of Life. Vitalising Literary Studies’ (*Journal of Dutch Literature* 8/2 2017, p.4). Although the focus of this article is on translation as a mode of active and intensive reading of literary texts, the key elements are the same, starting from the idea of the nomad.

In conclusion

So you could say that this approach to translation aims to do more than impart and rehearse linguistic and cultural skills: it offers a new way of looking at the world which in turn intends to expand horizons and radically alter a student's position so that they can negotiate any language and culture in any combination.

You might wonder how students react to such demands on them, and it is true that I have only experimented with undergraduates of European languages at UCL. In order to put these ideas into practice, in addition to my course in Advanced Translation, I created a new course entitled Nomadic Literature which students could take as an option alongside their national literary studies. The following quotation from Braidotti expresses the affirmative philosophy underlying the course:

[...] the important aspect of nomadic vitalism is that it is neither organicist nor essentialist but rather pragmatic and immanent. There is no overarching concept of life, just practices and flows of becoming, complex assemblages and heterogeneous relations – no idealised transcendental, but virtual multiplicities.

The philosophical underpinnings were explained fully in the early part of the courses, and an initial reaction of uncertainty gave way to a willingness to experiment and a greater confidence because the students learned to follow their own motivations and desires through active creative engagement with the literary culture of the language they are studying.

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