Im)possible Translations: Challenging Therapeutic Authority Through Textual Practices

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In this paper I endeavour to look at therapy through the metaphor of translation, and by unfolding some of the problems of translation, particularly as they relate to structural power hierarchies of systems of meaning production (I refer both to different languages and their relative status, as we can observe for example in the dominance of the English language as global communication currency, and to different discursive domains such as social science, therapy, literature etc.) to highlight some of the challenges that therapists, as well as researchers, face in their

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respective positions as mediators and arbiters of other people's meanings and actions.

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Introduction

My involvement with therapeutic practices has been through my experiential and theoretical training in systemic group and family therapy at the Athenian Institute of Anthropos in Greece. This training complemented my academic studies in sociology and currently my postgraduate studies in critical psychology.

Over the years I have come to think of 'therapy' as a process of learning a new language. In every language there is not only new vocabulary, grammar and syntax to fathom, but also a cultural- ideological context that references concepts and terms to particular practices and meanings attached and generated by them. This process involves the necessary action of translation from one set of references to another – and although this seems to take place at the level of the individual, it involves charting and navigating the social-symbolic space of a language and negotiating its interface with another language-space that can only be understood as a socio- historical process inscribed in, and inscribing, the individual actor. In this sense, 'therapy' does not take place at the level of the individual who renegotiates a 'better' relationship with his/her world but inscribes the individual in a framework of symbolic and material relations that define and regulate the available identity- positions that this individual can take up.[4]

I suggest that thinking of translation as a methodology for both therapy and research is useful to open up a space to consider the productive role of language in constructing and challenging the subject-positions that typically have become normalized/naturalized in these practices. Both therapy and research delineate, prescribe and evaluate different subject positions, those who speak and those who are

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[4] •   1 E.g. the notion of 'individual improvement' or 'empowerment' needs to be socio-historically located and questioned as to its affiliation with prevailing socio- economic relations and their ideological ground, such as the antagonistic free-market economy of liberal capitalism.

spoken about, as subjects and discourses. This means that they cannot be considered as either neutral or objective practices but rather are regulated and regulating procedures that function accord- ing to specific scripts/texts. Even in their emancipatory versions, of 'liberating' human potential or 'giving voice', they remain embedded in institutionalized contexts that legitimize certain actions and marginalize or penalize others. Furthermore they are implicated in the construction of the 'problems' they are supposed to record and solve. If instead we start to consider problems of 'therapy' as problems of translation, i.e. breaking the assumed correspondence between identities and discourses, it might be possible to highlight and challenge the link between normalized subjectivities and dominant socio-cultural practices. What goes on between therapist and client, or between members of a therapeutic group can be seen as an ongoing process of translation, testifying to the power of language and the language of power.

Translation as (Text) Language – Space

The text that follows is heterogeneous. In breaking from the genre of a unitary homogenous text attributed to the voice of one author it questions notions of authenticity, originality and identity in writing that are also put in question by translation. This is also a fractured text: in its disjuncture it cannot, nor does it aspire to, produce a total and totalizing image, although there are some key themes running through it that echo my preoccupation with the *naturalization, legitimation and surveillance (policing) of academic and therapeutic practices and enacted by them*. I am concerned, for example, to challenge the production, classification, distribution and investment practices, that is, the political economy of language and knowledge that allocates the 'poetic' to art and the 'rational' to science. These are constructed not only as distinct bodies of material, but also and most insidiously – embedded as they are in our primary system of signification – they remain unconscious and therefore imprisoning, constructed as *distinct language domains and practices*, closely guarded by institutionally established, i.e. historically sanctioned, rules and standards. Finally I am concerned to challenge the boundary between feeling and thought that establishes the latter as critical, accountable, capable of conceptualizing much valued abstractions, and the former as the mushy slush we privately wade through, but do not represent in our serious academic writing, certainly a public affair. Writing for me is

always an existentially agonizing and passionate endeavour. Language, after all, engenders values. This text is also a performance, in language, about language and space, about opening a space through a performance of language. In this it is a momentary embodiment of theory in writing.

a. Performing the text

She masters the foreign tongue. The foreign tongue becomes familiar, close, accessible. She stands between the mother tongue and the foreign tongue; she moves from one to the other like a virtual switching of realities. Yet there is no interface between the tongues. Yet. Or maybe never. Is it possible?

She struggles with words, back and forth, back and forth. The mother tongue feels oppressed, resents, resists: 'I will not surrender to the master foreign tongue, render myself understandable, palatable in the other's terms. This world that I am in is not translatable. I will not surrender to this other's naming. Period.' Silence. A block. An impasse.

Then a desire. To name the oppression is a starting point. This is where the possibility of translation begins, but in whose words, in other words, on whose terms? Again a struggle. It appears to be a struggle with or about meaning, but actually it is a struggle about license and copyright, a struggle about rights. Who has the power to name? Which language, whose language has the power to represent and signify in the given moment? And what is the pay off, the cost of this? How is this power granted or claimed?

A vicious cycle: if I speak in your master tongue I am already your slave, so I have to defy and dismantle this master tongue. But I can only do so by bringing in the mother tongue, i.e. by translating, which brings me back to looking at the mother tongue from the foreign tongue. Back and forth. Unstable positions, inconclusive renderings. Back and forth. A pendulous and pending moment. The grooves deepen and spread in different directions.

Positioning myself. I grew up bilingual, almost. My father was Greek-speaking and my mother American English-speaking. These two languages and cultures were constantly in battle and I have yet to understand and account for the ways they have

shaped my apprehension of myself and my construction of the world, in their many significations and investments. It is not only that they were gendered by virtue of their family representatives, they were also gendered in complex, cultural and historical ways, in that e.g. greek[5] became the language of politics, politics also being traditionally of male gender in Greece, and English the language of feelings and creative expression, 'proper' to females. If this signals a split in the family's linguistic and cultural unity, it is only a split made more evident, because we cannot but imagine it present in monolingual families as well. However the tension of this pressing need for an ongoing linguistic and cultural translation process is apparently too much for a family alone to hold, if it does not translate the incomprehensible back into the cultural-social domain where it originates.

Positioning translation. I want to open a space between different positions – some might call it a dialogue – between the impossibility and the necessity of translation; between the 'alien-ness' and the fascination of a different tongue, between the academic and the poetic performance, between the desire to command knowledge and the inconclusive articulation of experience, between knowing and wondering, between the voice of authority and the voice that stumbles for words. This is all about translation.

b. 'Translating' sources

Next I will mention some of the sources that have inspired me and influenced the questions and preoccupations I have been engaging with. One source has been the domain of postcolonial theory (McLeod, 2000; Spivak, 2000) and postcolonial literature,[6] (Spivak, 1995) particularly as it takes on the issue of the domination of the English language. These are key debates around language and power: locating languages and cultures in hierarchies of difference, naming the language of

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[5] I choose not to capitalize language nouns (e.g. Greek, English, German, etc.) and linguistic/national adjectives (e.g. Greek politics) as a strategy against the reification of what I consider to be descriptive rather than essential categories.

[6] Here I would like to draw attention to the distinction of terms 'post-colonial' as a historical moment, and 'postcolonial' as a theoretical moment (Barker, Hulme and Iversen, 1994).

oppression as the context of oppression and in that instance performing an act of resistance, resistance to complicity, resistance to recuperation, resistance to silence.

A second source has emerged from the domain of post-structuralist literary theory, most importantly the work of Roland Barthes (1984) regarding the text. From this source I have been inspired to question the finality of the text and the centrality of the author. This has enabled me to question – within the project of translation – the uniqueness and closure of the original text (or text of origin, source text) to be secured and guarded at all cost. Viewing the text as an open territory rather than a closed field is a starting point from which to venture into the finitely (because they are *in* language) infinite (re)configurations of language. This represents a move from looking for and speaking about 'meaning' to speaking about and looking at the plays of language. 'In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered' (Barthes, 1984: 147).

Another source has been Walter Benjamin's essay '*The task of the translator*' (Benjamin, 1999a, 1999b). 'Translation is a mode. To comprehend it as mode one must go back to the original, for it contains the law governing the translation: its translatability' (Benjamin, 1999a: 71). 'Translatability' is here seen as a value of the text, i.e. of language, through which translation becomes a vehicle for generating the text as an agent in and of history.

Finally, from the field of translation studies I have drawn on the work of Lawrence Venuti (2000) to access debates about the relative autonomy of translation, in relation to texts in both the source and target languages that prevent it from being 'immediate or transparent communication'.

Hence translation, for me, is a way of linking issues of power to language. In this sense translation becomes a metaphor or transference[7] by which to question other practices of representation, it becomes a methodology.

Translation as Methodology and Praxis

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[7] Metaphor or metaforá in Greek has this double meaning

At this point, and for reasons of exploring processes of de- identification that underlie questions of translation, I continue by putting the text in the subject-position, as this is a text about other texts, incorporating other texts, rendering other texts. The text then wishes to question following conditions of possibility:

I. The (im)possibilities of translation

Translation as equation is not possible, the different worlds we inhabit in our different languages are incommensurable; they remain separate and irreducible; they remain foreign. Multiple identities may be possible, but they are not interchangeable or equal. Moreover, translation always involves an act of appropriation and violence enacted upon the original text, an act determined by different historically determined, political-ideological imperatives.

Examples:

Example 1. Walter Benjamin (1999a, 1999b) lauds Hoelderlin's (literal and thus challenging) translation of ancient Greek tragedy. This effort needs to be placed in the context of the development of a national German literary tradition that seeks to develop, through the translation of classical texts, what they consider to be the aesthetic and moral values that should inspire, or emanate from this literature. In this sense translations of ancient Greek texts that seek to forge a link between this past, as it is 'discovered' and recreated by the Enlightenment, and the present, play an important role in legitimating modern Western literary and scientific traditions, and their political agendas. Ancient Greeks, though, considered all non-Greek speaking peoples 'barbarians' and so would possibly not want their texts translated.

Example 2. Marlene Nourbese Philip (1991, 1993) writes a poem *in English* about the English language being the language of the colonizer, of the oppressor; it is a poem (about) naming, resisting, fracturing, reclaiming power, the power of the oppressed, through language. The poem not only represents but embodies, thus collapsing signifier and signified into one, the history of Western colonial oppression and its subversion. It is a statement *meant* to be in English, because it is *about* English and about *undoing* English – it cannot be translated precisely because of the historical relation of domination and resistance inscribed in it and giving rise to it.

a. Inequalities of power and language hierarchies are enacted in translation

If Example 1 speaks of translation as an appropriation of a philosophical and literary tradition, Example 2 speaks of translation as the exercise of power, played out in and through language. It is an exercise simultaneously symbolic and material because it is inscribed in the various social institutions and their practices (e.g. education, literature, media, professional specialization) that guard the cultural-linguistic borders which produce them. Therefore, in translation, one has to be aware not only of the text but also of the discourses and practices in which it is located, both in the source and the target context. 'Translation is not just about texts: nor is it only about cultures and power. It is about the relation of one to the other' (Harvey, 2000: 466).

If 'translating is always ideological because it releases a domestic remainder, an inscription of values, beliefs, and representations linked to. . . the domestic culture' (Venuti, 2000: 485), it has to be further qualified in relation to global hierarchies of power, since these implicate translation within different historically produced acts of domination or resistance: e.g. in the context of globalized institutional production of social scientific knowledge today, with its differential allocation of value between central and peripheral academic traditions, translating from Greek into English is a differently significated act than translating from English into Greek.

b. Cultural and linguistic incommensurability

As I try to translate sections of my research data, which partly consist of group discussions held with primary school teachers in Greece, from Greek into English, I am faced with a number of difficulties of representation. First of all on a linguistic level, sentences follow a different syntactic structure which often cannot be translated into what would be 'readable' English. However if I adjust the Greek text to the English syntax, I will be changing the rhythm and flow of the conversation, imposing on it a structure that is alien to its original articulation. Secondly, I realize that for what is talked about to make sense to a culturally foreign readership, I would have to footnote the whole text with analytic descriptions of cultural practices and meanings that frame the issues discussed. Thirdly, I note the distance between the concepts theorized in the English social scientific literature and the concepts used by the Greek

participants to discuss what would seem to be the 'same' issues[8]. Finally, I become aware that even within my own language, Greek, there are different cultures and styles of articulation to which my access and understanding are limited due to class and educational differences. For all the above reasons translation – which is itself an interpretation – can only be partial, incomplete, problematic and fraught with tensions. Nevertheless exposing rather than dissolving or obscuring these tensions marks out a position for a self-critical and negotiable authority in research as well as therapy.

'Translation is doomed to inadequacy because of irreducible differences, not just between languages and cultures, but also within them' (Venuti, 2000: 218). Thus we need to locate 'translation' as occurring wherever two different systems of signification are brought together.

'Non-translatability'
'What do you mean?' This question can be asked ad infinitum because language reveals and hides at the same time, what is spoken can only be framed against what remains unspoken. Thus the meaning of words cannot be ultimately grasped as a concrete, incontestable, bounded reality. Language resists objectification, it is a performance as much as an explanation, it engenders an experience as much as it articulates it. This experience in and through language is untranslatable, opaque, not only to others but to itself as well. The authoritative voice of researcher – therapist – translator is temporarily restrained in this moment/space of in- determinacy and other voices can be heard.

Here the problem is not so much the incommensurability of cultures, the distinction between conceptual schemes that complicates communication and reference, as the inherent indeterminacy of language, the unavoidable instability of the signifying process. (Venuti, 2000: 218)

This is what Spivak (2000) renders as the 'rhetoricity' of language:

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[8] E.g. in exploring mainstream Greek representations of Greek muslims, I start with the English discourse of the 'other' in the literature, only to find that in Greek we talk of the 'stranger'. Should I theorize the other or the stranger

Language is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries. The ways in which rhetoric or figuration disrupt logic themselves point at the possibility of random contingency, beside language, around language. (p. 398)

Another example: as I attempt to transcribe a group discussion in Greek and then translate it into English, it seems impossible to capture and render all the para-linguistic aspects of the discussion, yet they are what gives it its particular tone and the words spoken their specific, contingent meaning, which is available to me precisely because of my participation in this group. I am forced to accept this limitation.

c. The violence of translation

Any and every translation is an act of appropriation and as such an act of violence; that is, an impossible and a liberating act.

Its impossibility lies in that it unavoidably domesticates the foreign text, even when guided by an ethical attempt –

. . . to restore or preserve the foreignness of the foreign text. Yet an ethics that counters the domesticating effects of the inscription can only be formulated and practiced primarily in *domestic* terms, in domestic dialects, registers, discourses, and styles. (Venuti, 2000: 469, italics in original)

It is liberating insofar as it is used to question, disrupt, challenge precisely the domestic terms to which it is confined.

This ethical attitude is therefore simultaneous with a political agenda: the domestic terms of the inscription become the focus of rewriting in the translation, discursive strategies where the hierarchies that rank the values in the domestic culture are disarranged to set going processes of defamiliarization, canon reformation, ideological critique, and institutional change. A translator may find that the very concept of the domestic merits interrogation for its concealment of heterogeneity and hybridity which can complicate existing stereotypes, canons, and standards applied in translation. (Venuti, 2000: 469)

Translation as a Reflexive Practice: A Matter of Ethics

Having noted the impossibilities of translation I want to explore some of the potential that lies within these limitations, as the understanding of them gives us the chance to

develop a more reflexive, situated practice, a dialogic space of many, overlapping and contrasting, languages. To do this, I will trace some of the transitions or mediations a reflexive translation-practice makes available to us.

It is only with the rise of poststructuralism that language becomes a site of uncontrollable polysemy, and translation is reconceived not simply as transformative of the foreign text, but interrogative or, as Jacques Derrida puts it, as "deconstructive". If translation inescapably reduces source meanings, it also releases target potentialities which rebound upon the foreign text in unsettling ways. (Venuti, 2000: 218)

A translation is a 'zone of contact' between the foreign and the translating cultures, but also within the latter. (Venuti, 2000: 477)

Translation becomes a way of interrogating the domestic by way of the foreign, and vice versa, thus locating its material in two different maps in hierarchical relation to each other. This can help us imagine a therapeutic practice, where a client's story can function as a reflection or critique of the therapist's theories and practices, rather than a procrustean table where what does not fit the frame gets truncated.

a. The role of the translator

There are two actions performed by the translator – as mediator and ethical agent.

The translator as mediator:

When motivated by this ethical politics of difference, the translator seeks to build a community with foreign cultures, to share an understanding with and of them and to collaborate on projects founded on that understanding, going so far as to allow it to revise and develop domestic values and institutions. (Venuti, 2000: 469)

Moreover in this process, the translator is inevitably an 'ethical agent'.

What is the place of 'love' in the ethical? The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay. (Spivak, 2000: 398)

This means that the translator needs to highlight rather than gloss over the ruptures of meaning, so as to disrupt any notion of familiarity with and recuperation of the foreign.

b. Institutions as translators

Institutions themselves can act as mediators between different social contexts thereby engendering a set of relations that can challenge dominant, hierarchically ordered and segregated practices. Therapeutic institutions that remain disengaged from the historically produced conflictual social relations are directly implicated in the legitimation and reproduction of the practices of domination and regulation that mark our neoliberal capitalist system. Can we envision a different practice?

I quote from the programme statement of a group of academic researchers and teachers at the university of Thessaloniki who collaborated to form the *Open Polytechnic* (1995):

The Social University is a form of the Public University. Its purpose is the *direct* relationship of the academic community with society. This principle underlies both dimensions of the relationship: research and teaching. . .

The Open Polytechnic seeks the unity of theory and praxis. The local society is not a theoretical object for the O.P. but a co-practising subject. This position has following consequences for the character of research.

Firstly, research is not academic: it encompasses claims for action. Secondly, the definition of research objects cannot be one-sided: it requires the cooperation of all partners. Thirdly, according to current scientific classifications, the different approaches (technological, sociological, governmental, psychological, etc.) cannot be recorded in a specialist discourse apprehensible only by the experts: they have to be constituted in a unified discourse. . .

The free and mutual relationship, the unity of theory and praxis and the participation in public matters completely define a research direction, only insofar as this is completed in teaching. The declared premises of free teaching – that teaching is offered to all and it relates to the social needs for knowledge – look forward to this consummation. (my translation, italics in original)

c. The text as translator

If language is an agent, not only a medium, then the text itself can be a site of contest and multiplicity rather than an authoritative, imposing monologue.

'Post-structuralism has shown some of us a staging of the agent within a three-tiered notion of language (as rhetoric, logic, silence)' (Spivak, 2000: 399, parentheses in original). So how can we highlight the role of language within a text?

 Language as history – history inscribed in language: each word encapsulates the history of its trajectory up to the point of its utterance. This word-history is in turn inscribed in histories of discourses, practices and social relations (Carter, 1987) that implicate language in the circumstances of their production. In this sense we need to be wary of the currencies and fashions, of words that become seemingly self-evident and transparent in meaning, such as empowerment, agency, accountability (Fairclough, 2001), particularly as they can be used to mask social problems as individual ones. The naturalization of therapeutic language within everyday speech, evident in the widespread – if questionable – use of such notions as unconscious, instinct, self-esteem, individuation, self-fulfilment, integration, should be interrogated for its potential complicity in the production of a-social, a-historical subjectivities, all the more unstable and vulnerable for that reason.

- Language as culture: a two edged sword. On the one hand my language betrays or highlights my 'culture', wherein are incorporated, to use the example of working class vs. middle class language-culture, education, profession, cultivation of tastes and life style. On the other hand a language, through its values, productions, connections and connotations, offers me a culture as a space in which to recognize and realize myself. This is best exemplified in therapeutic language that not only offers a technology for regulating the self, but also marks the initiated from the uninitiated, itself an index of class, edu- cation, etc.

- Language as experience/world: I come to know myself, my world through language. Language is productive. As I learn a language I/it constructs a world and my experience of it. A different language sets up a different world, or a different experience of the world with different principles or conditions of assemblage[9]. This is often experienced through a profound sense of loss and

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[9] .g. specialist scientific languages or therapeutic languages that sometimes need to be translated themselves in order to be accessible.

alienation (Hoffman, 1998) as the familiar contours of our linguistically mediated subjectivities fracture and dissolve into a landscape whose landmarks are strange or nonsensical.

• Language as embodiment: it enacts what it names. Through the performative dimension of language, we can understand embodiment as that which not only speaks in but also *through* language. That which evokes and thereby acquires a material reality. In this sense a text is always dialogically constituted, internally/and in relation to other texts.

My aim has been to open a dialogic space, through a text that carries multiple voices, of variable authority and coherence. The inevitable messiness and inconclusiveness could be seen as a weakness or an asset, if it engenders not only further engagement with some of the issues presented here, but also allows for the less articulate and 'lesser-ranked' voices to be represented. For this could help keep alive the situated, dialogical character of therapeutic interactions and their moment by moment shifts.

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