

Laura Bieger

'Living in translated worlds' - a pragmatist approach to transnationalism

Review of International American Studies 2/3, 16-20

2007

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach
dozwolonego użytku.



'LIVING IN TRANSLATED WORLDS'— A PRAGMATIST APPROACH TO TRANSNATIONALISM

Laura Bieger

Freie Universität Berlin

'The history of all cultures is a history of cultural borrowing', Edward Said once said—a thought that could be rephrased as: the history of all cultures is a history of translation. This paper is about translation and its methodological and critical potential for theorizing transnationalism. To unfold this potential we need to understand this term in the broadest possible sense: as a principle and agent of transformation; a principle we find at work on the production as well as on the reception side of any instance of signification; and which operates through any kind of medium and in any semiotic register. Such an understanding goes well beyond the general use of the term which ties it to processes of linguistic transfer in a much stricter and more limited sense. In the following pages I will make some rather speculative remarks and far-reaching suggestions about the methodological potential slumbering in the concept of translation, and in this sense I would like the following thoughts to be understood as an open invitation for further speculation and discussion. And yet I don't want to expose them to debate without mentioning that they are grounded in a long and intense period of research which I did around the concept of translation and which, for the sake of brevity, I will scarcely be referencing here.

To study cultural formations in a transnational perspective is to encounter various and complex dynamics of exchange and transformation; dynamics which breach across a wide array of borders between as well as within cultural formations formerly perceived in a national paradigm; which materialize through all different media as attempted acts of communication; which might be written, painted, photographed, filmed, sculptured, built, tailored, spoken, sung, danced, gestured, etc.; and whose trajectory might very well be ruptured, contain gaps, take detours, lead elsewhere. One thing can be safely assumed without further specifying the spectrum of exchange dynamics at stake here: to become operational as a comprehensive methodological tool apt to deal with this range of different processes, the broadening of our understanding of translation beyond its traditional linguistic borders mentioned in the beginning needs to go hand in hand with developing a new systematization of the concept itself—a task which I suggest to meet by dealing with it on the formal and operational level addressed above.

Understood as this principle and agent of transformation, the concept of translation rests upon three intersecting mechanisms: a transformative movement of cultural/material expressions which is situated in a specific context; a strategy which lays out the trajectory of transformation (often, but not necessarily, defined as at least temporarily leading from one pole to another); and a specific mode of realizing and articulating this strategy (and which in this creative sense can be seen as the poetic side of translation). As I already indicated, these three parameters are defined in relation to one another; they are not separable entities or vectors, but overlap and bring about one another. We might think of them as indicating three different perspectives from which to approach the transformative work realized in an instance of translation. And just as there is no such thing as an empty sign, these parameters need to be thought of in relation to the (virtual or actual) material which is being processed through them. In their relational and interdependent structure the parameters offer a compound analytical tool which is at once highly flexible and yet in application immediately becomes specific.

With this potential in sight, the larger suggestion I want to make is that this translational analytic *could be* but so far *hasn't been* used to study the numerous dynamics that are constantly modifying the cultural formations which constitute our life-worlds. And this, although it seems to me especially well suited as a methodological framework for a transnational approach to American Studies, or Cultural Studies in general, since both have come to understand culture in equally dynamic and transformative terms. Thus it comes as no surprise that since the 1990s there have been exchange processes across the disciplinary borders of Cultural and Translation Studies; borrowings which for me simultaneously indicate the usefulness of those applications and witness the half-heartedness with this they have so far been pursued.

'It was only a question of time', writes Sherry Simon, 'until cultural studies "discovered" translation'. She continues:

After all, the globalization of culture means that we all live in 'translated' worlds, that the spaces of knowledge we inhabit assemble ideas and styles of multiple origins, that transnational communications and frequent migrations make every cultural site a crossroads and meeting place. These ideas have become accepted truths of our contemporaneity. (Simon, 1996: 135)

In line with this reasoning, cultural formations are perceived as intersections of meaning which can be located neither in a spatial nor a temporal moment of origin, and thus one might say that Homi Bhabha's transitional notion of the 'third space' has become the (con-)temporary homeland for much of today's cultural criticism. Bhabha was also a leading figure to make the notion of translation applicable to the field of cultural studies. As he writes in a well-known passage:

The language of critique is effective not because it keeps forever separate the terms of the master and the slave, [...] but to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a *space of translation*: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moments of politics. (Bhabha, 1994: 25; emphasis mine)



I am merely restating the already familiar when saying that this postcolonial perspective has been especially influential in generating transnational approaches to studying cultural formations. To draw on the concept of translation as Bhabha does in the statement above works especially well in this respect because it allows for evoking both the dynamic, unstable and hybrid nature of cultural formations, and the regulatory (power) aspects of cultural signification within them. Beyond these familiarities, two further aspects of Bhabha's use of translation make it especially useful as methodological framework for a transnational perspective: its embeddedness in specific spatial situations resonates strongly with the emphasis on regional cultures which are of major concern in transnational scholarship; and its close ties to negotiating subject positions—which also play out in Salman Rushdie's well-known phrase 'I am a translated man' (Rushdie, 1991: 13)—make it apt to reflect issues of identity politics, another major concern, from a perspective of (re-)production and exchange.

And yet despite these clever appropriations and their promising implications I see a major problem in the way in which Cultural Studies has taken interest in the concept of translation. In the respective discourse it usually functions as a rhetorical figure, a metaphor, and not as a further systematized analytical tool. And thus the use of the concept typically derives most of its critical impact by means of toying with the broad range of associations which it generates, but without sorting out its further methodological implications. This bias is noteworthy because the associations evoked in this fashion tell us something about the function assigned to the concept of translations in the wake of its cultural studies 'discovery'. This function draws heavily on the *strategic* implications of translation, and in this regard it compellingly connects the cultural studies discourse with recent works from the field of translation studies; works which have stressed the deep ideological roots this concept has within its larger epistemic field. To point out just one example, for Lori Chamberlain the 'metaphorics of translations' are nothing less than

[...] a symptom of larger issues of western culture: of the power relations as they divide in terms of gender; of a persistent (though not always hegemonic) desire to equate language or language use with morality; of a quest for originality and unity, and a consequent intolerance of duplicity, of what cannot be decided. (Chamberlain, 2000: 66–7)

While I find myself in deep agreement with the points that Chamberlain raises here, her critical intervention also sheds light on an aspect about this strategic bias which I find highly problematic: namely, how well this metaphorical use has been serving the discursive needs of Cultural Studies. In and by itself this observation might only seem to have minor consequences regarding the critical potential the concept can enfold within the critical logic of contemporary Cultural Studies; it is, however, tied to and symptomatic of a larger, and in my understanding much more serious problem: due to this strategic bias the *poetic* aspects inherent in the concept of translation—that is: the specific modes and mechanisms which actually *realize* the strategies and thus materialize the transformative and creational work of producing cultural formations and the respective realities they embody—are utterly neglected. If at all, these aspects are implied in the most general or intuitive sense; however, I don't know of a single case in which the application of the concept of translation goes along with

a systematic study of the rhetorical means through which it becomes operative within a cultural formation. I emphasize this point so strongly here because I believe that translation could do much more for us working in the fields of American and Cultural Studies if we began to spell out the underlying operational mechanisms I suggest to specify by means of the three parameters mentioned earlier. Guiding questions to work with this approach would be: What exactly is happening along those pathways drawn out by the transfer and transformation of cultural material which we intuitively subsume under the label of translation? What can be said about the specific processes conceptualized through the translational parameters and their interaction within a specific cultural context? How do we trace the processes of transformation which they bring to our attention? And what do they tell us about the cultural formations through which they are operating?

Let me indicate a possible way of addressing these questions from the meta-level which has been the site of this argument throughout. Recent attempts to 'rethink' the concept of translation (Venuti, 1992) have proposed to substitute for the former model of translation as a movement *between* different languages by the notion of a movement *within* language. The decisive impulse behind this reconception is, of course, the poststructuralist critique of a representationalist understanding of language which (in its deconstructivist variations) goes along with claims that no line can be drawn between one language and another, that no language can ever be complete by itself but only exists as an incoherent part of an ever modifying texture of articulation. What would happen if we took a similar approach to our understanding of processes of cultural production and signification in general? Instead of dealing with translational movements *between* cultural formations, semiotic fields and attempted acts of communication we would then think of such movements *within* one comprehensive and ever-changing force-field of forms, shapes and meanings; a field, I should add, which does contain fissures and ruptures, gaps and holes and which thus produces translations as well as 'mistranslations' as two species of this productivity which are impossible to tell apart.

What I want to indicate with these last remarks is the need to understand translation as a *cultural* rather than a *textual* practice; a practice which, at least in my understanding, cannot be thought of without a model of intersubjectivity for which the subject is more than a mere effect of signifying/power structures; and which turns the deconstructivist contingency to arrive at a desired meaning into a phenomenological contingency of (mis)perception. In other words, if we are to take the deconstructivist cue that translation operates within rather than between cultural formations we need to modify this approach in a way that conceives of the material of translation as only being destructed, transformed and re-created if it produces any kind of creative resonance in some-*body* articulating or perceiving it. A blueprint of this reconfiguration already exists in the pragmatist semiotics of Charles S. Peirce for whom 'a sign is not a sign unless it translated itself into another sign' (Peirce, 5: 594). Using Peirce rather than the deconstructivists as a touchstone to rethink translation and systematize its analytical potential seems like the right choice to me because not only does his triadic conception of the sign embrace the intersubjective dimension needed to concep-



tualize translation as a comprehensive and effective cultural practice but he also conceives this practice as being utterly creative and experiential.

It would go too far to fully elaborate the foundational logic of translation implicit in the Peircian semiotics and their further implications here, and thus I will leave this task aside and conclude by taking the suggestion to make use of his approach as a cue to spelling out the pragmatic dimension of the model of translation I have been sketching out here. Like pragmatist philosophy this model of translation is rather a method to be applied to a certain problem than a self-sufficient theory; it derives its theoretical insights from its application to specific and practical problems. Since its primary interest concerns the transformative nature of translation, it is rather more interested in strategic questions about means and ends than in those about truths and origins (along these lines it would make quite a bit of sense to think about the *cash-value* of a specific translation). And as a target-oriented practice it is genuinely site-specific and within these situations turns to the experience inscribed into the material of translation; thus it approaches cultural formations phenomenologically: as lived structures of meaning that affect us and are constantly modified ('affected') by us.

WORKS CITED:

- Bhabha, H. K. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Chamberlain, L. (2000) 'Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation', in L. Venuti (ed.) *The translation studies reader*. London/New York: Routledge. 66–67.
- Peirce, C. S. (1931–35) *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (eds). Vol. 5. Cambridge: Harvard UP. 594
- Rushdie, S. (1991) *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Granta.
- Simon, S. (1996) *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* London/New York: Routledge.
- Venuti, L. (ed.) (1992) *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subject, Ideology*. London/New York: Routledge.