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Translation equivalent but different, impossible but necessary, interlingual or intercultural: conceptualizing translation

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ABSTRACT

In this study I will try to outline a common emancipatory program for the politically engaged translator based on the work of these thinkers. We will pay special attention to the counter-hegemonic potential of translation as developed by our authors and to the concept of "constellation" advanced by Santos in his works. Another chief concern will be to explore the divide between these two different concepts of translation (interlingual and "cultural"), trying to answer several pressing questions. Can these different notions be unified in such a way that the insights from these thinkers can be reconciled with mainstream translation theory? Do we run the risk of diluting the concept of translation to such an extent, in this constant conceptual broadening, that it ceases to have any solid foundation?

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1 INTRODUCTION

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a well-known figure, both as a writer and as a vocal advocate for the use of African languages (he does not include European tongues) in African countries and the nations of the Black Diaspora. While the usual argument for the conservation of English as the language of culture and administration stresses the unifying role that it has played in a continent prone to ethnic strife, the true language of Africa is and can only be translation, a constant practice of translation that must be promoted by the institutions and taught as a discipline at school. When used that way, translation becomes "an act of patriotism" [1]. This patriotism obviously rises above any particular nation. It is a quest for wholeness, the task of "remembering" the dismembered, that is to be achieved through a revitalized interpretation of Pan-Africanism.

Étienne Balibar, a Marxist French philosopher who was a student of Althusser, thinks along the same lines, mutatis mutandis, when confronting a very different context: that of Europe and its political present and future. He is concerned in particular with what he sees as the creation of "a true European Apartheid" [2], which marginalizes large numbers of people both outside and inside its borders, immigrants being a case in point. To reverse this trend, he proposes four "worksites of democracy" one of which concerns the field of European culture. It is there that Europeans must decide, among other things, for whom they are building their political space. Balibar claims that English cannot be the language of Europe, because it is both much more and much less than that. Instead, he suggests that this role is to be taken up by translation. This European language of languages reminds us, with whom Balibar also shares the view of the importance that education would have in his project. The French author does, however, specify that the usual concept of translation must be expanded to "broaden the circle of legitimate translation" (thus including languages such as Arabic or Urdu) and must also make the move to a "broader cultural level" (2004, p. 234). The ultimate goal is to create a "means of cultural resistance" that is not built "on the traditionalist and communitarian bases of identitarian 'national languageculture'" [3].

Judith Butler, while reflecting on the possibility of a universalism that does not project an imperialist message, strikes a similar chord. She disagrees that true universality can be expressed from outside a particular culture and language:
"the very concept of universality compels an understanding of culture as a relation of exchange and a task of translation" [4]. However, just as we saw with Balibar, translation for Butler is not intrinsically emancipatory, as it can work and has worked in the past to further the goals of colonial expansion, when it is used to implant dominant values in the language of the subordinated. Thus, following the lead of Gayatri Spivak, she vindicates the role of cultural translation (again, the cultural turn) "as both a theory and practice of political responsibility".

2 METHODS

The last author discussed in this article, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, in his reasoning about decolonization also arrives at translation as a tool to overcome what he calls "lazy reason," which in the name of universality takes as the whole that which cannot be but a simple part. In other words, much like Butler, he claims that any single theory which attempts to grasp the whole world is bound to presuppose "the monoculture of a given totality and the homogeneity of its parts" [5]. The alternative to such a grand theory is, precisely, the work of translation. This work takes the form of what Santos calls "diatopical hermeneutics," a sort of negative universalism predicated on the impossibility of cultural completeness.

While these authors have much in common, and a coherent agenda could seem to arise from their ideas almost spontaneously, there is at the very least an essential difference in the way they conceptualize translation itself. Ngugi and Balibar adhere to what could be considered the standard understanding of translation as an interlingual practice. Butler and Santos, on the other hand, deploy a considerably broader interpretation of the term. For them, the word translation eminently describes a political practice by which resistance movements from different cultures (not necessarily different languages) can be combined avoiding the pitfalls of both particularism and monocultural universalism. Thus, Butler sees translation as part of an "open-ended hegemonic struggle" (2000c, p. 38), while for Santos "the work of translation becomes crucial to define, in each concrete and historical moment or context, which constellations of non-hegemonic practices carry more counter-hegemonic potential" [6].

3 DISCUSSIONS

The interplay between translation and culture as conditioned by ideology and power has been under close scrutiny for some time now. Translation Studies as a discipline has undergone a continuous process of expansion that has moved the focus away from merely linguistic and textual considerations, in a trend famously known as the "cultural turn" [7]. Now this tendency has been taken even further with the incorporation of methods and criteria coming from postcolonial studies, gender studies, queer studies and from the study of the interplay between translation and ideology, politics and power in general, leading some to talk of a "power turn" [8] and of translation as "a field of power" [9]. There are recent monographs compiling the thought of different scholars on different aspects of that interplay that are expanding and

deepening our understanding and conceptualization of translation, such as The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Politics or Critical Translation Studies to name just a few [10].

On the other hand, outside the field of Translation Studies, some thinkers concerned with finding an alternative to the current political and economic status quo have been involved in a convergent movement, by which they have arrived at translation as a key factor in their own theories. Coming mostly from poststructuralism and what has been termed the "linguistic turn" in politics [11], it could be said that, following a symmetric evolution, these thinkers have developed their own "translation turn" as part of their study of power. What they see in translation is the chance to overcome an antinomy that under one guise or another has plagued and, to some extent, paralyzed progressive thinking over the past decades: that between the (misleading) universalistic discourse of grand theories radiating from the (imperialist) center, and particularism expressed through different appeals to exclusive identity. These particularistic appeals are seen to be divisive and easily neutralized, separately, by global capitalism.

Of course, it is immediately apparent that such a notion of translation must differ from any standard interlinguistic definition. The question whether this wider interpretation of the term, generally categorized as "cultural" translation, can be somehow considered akin to the customary understanding of rendering a text from one language to another is certainly not new in the field of translation studies and it will indeed be an important part of our argument here.

On the other hand, it should likewise be clear that the notion of universalism explicitly or implicitly deployed by the authors examined here does not align with the traditional usage of the term. As a matter of fact, the political and/or philosophical backgrounds of these scholars have made them acutely aware of the pitfalls involved in any universalist program, however well-meaning, that entails an assimilation of difference. Again, this is not an unfamiliar issue for translation scholars, as we shall argue.

As stated earlier, our discussion revolves around the writings of four intellectuals who have explored the emancipatory potential of such a (qualifiedly) universalist notion of translation: Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Étienne Balibar, Judith Butler, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos. The aim of the paper is to find a network of common features in the approach to translation of these intellectuals, translating them into each other, in a way, so as to approach a common notion of translation as a potential vehicle for a new, non-imperalistic universalism. At the same time, we will study their writings in light of some of the latest developments in Translation Studies, in an attempt to establish dialogue and contribute to the convergent movement we mentioned above, exploring the relevance of their ideas for translation scholars and for the actual practice of translators.

The interest of these authors in translation is arguably linked with their search for a way to articulate different political claims without diluting or domesticating them in the process. After all, translation has often been characterized as the art of achieving what Jakobson famously defined as "equivalence in difference" [12]. A similar line of reasoning offers a way forward for some of these thinkers: the possibility —to invert Santos's denunciation of monocultural universalism— of constructing a whole that is more than the mere sum of its parts, a confluence that somehow respects the diversity of its members, a way out of those intractable antinomies. Thus, in the African context, confronted with the alternative between the specter of ethnic strife fueled by a Babel of languages or the acceptance of the language of the colonizer as lingua franca and vehicle for culture, Ngugi refuses either choice. He opts instead for an ongoing communication among all the actors of a Pan-African Renaissance through the means of translation, the "language of languages, a language through which all languages can talk to one another" [13]. Similarly, in a European context marked by the crisis of the nation-state, Étienne Balibar, following Umberto Eco, turns to "the practice of translation" as both "the only genuine 'idiom of Europe'" and "a means of cultural resistance and a countervailing power, but not on the traditionalist and communitarian bases of identitarian 'national languageculture'" and also "distinct from the globalized circulation of information". Again, a third way out of a false binomial dilemma, made all the more necessary because some kind of universalized resistance is considered to be indispensable, due to the unviability of "the insistence on exclusive identity and otherness, which the system already produces and instrumentalizes" [14]. This is an idea that is echoed in Butler's writing on multiculturalism, which she feels should not be reduced to a mere "politics of particularity" but understood as "a politics of translation" (2000b, p. 168), but which nevertheless avoids a colonial, expansionist assertion of universalism

This idea of translation as "language of languages" or true language of a multilingual continent, is not exclusive of these authors. One is reminded, for instance, of Pym's discussion of the New Centennial Review recognition of translation as "the language of the Americas". An earlier precursor could be seen in Benjamin's notion of "pure language" [15]. A similar move can be appreciated in Boaventura de Sousa Santos' rejection of the Western concept of universalism, which he characterizes as "metonymic reason", that is, the obsession with "the idea of totality in the form of order". Again, this rejection of universalism in its common understanding does not entail an

entrenchment in particularism: "Recognising the relativity of cultures does not necessarily imply adopting relativism as a philosophical stance" (2012, p. 60). In other words, what these authors have found in translation is a way to "square the circle," to cut the Gordian knot formed by the interlacing of monocultural universalism and essentialist particularism in its various incarnations.

Unsurprisingly, this political potential of translation has not gone unnoticed in specialized literature either. Shaobo Xie, for instance, when discussing it in connection with globalization, posits the potential of translation for a democratic articulation of "universality across cultural boundaries" [16]. Other authors, however, seem loath to rescue the term from its monocultural baggage and prefer the use of concepts such as openness or cosmopolitanism [17].

Despite this common thread, a case could be made that, while Butler and Santos do have universality in mind and they seem to point towards a global theory of translation for emancipation, Balibar and Ngugi are concerned with more "localized" projects. Balibar's starting point, for instance, is a reflection about Europe, its languages and its future. However, he acknowledges that the "impossible" task of translation is to create a "universal community of languages". In fact, universality is a topic to which he has devoted attention elsewhere. As we have seen, what he is truly after is a means of universalizing resistance, albeit with Europe as a starting point because of its unique history and circumstances. As far as Ngugi is concerned, it is important to keep in mind that, with his extension of the PanAfrican world to the black diaspora and his project of translating all the great works into African languages, for instance, he is really "recast[ing] his discourse in the language of cosmopolitanism" and thus creating "a universalistic discourse without precedent in Ngugi's critical work". After all, his Pan-Africanism stems from a rooted decolonial project that is constantly looking at the future, not the past. But perhaps the problem lies not so much in the use (or not) of the term "universality" by the authors, but in their understanding of translation. Do they all mean the same by it? This is a key issue that merits a thorough analysis, but first we need to take a look at what is it that makes translation so enticing for these scholars.

At the root of the movement towards translation we have witnessed in sociology, philosophy and political thought, we find the growing importance of culture and language in the field of politics, the aforementioned "linguistic turn." This is a discussion that goes well beyond the scope of this paper, but one of its offshoots was the re-elaboration of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony put forward by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (1985), where they introduce the idea of "hegemonic universality …, the only one that a political community can reach" (loc. 98). It is precisely this concept of universality that Judith Butler, for instance, wants to "restage" in terms of cultural translation. And it is precisely in a book named Contingency, Hegemony, Universality, in which she engages with Laclau and Slavoj Žižek in a conversation regarding the topics referred to in the title, where she develops that notion of cultural translation in more detail. We will take that conversation as a starting point because it offers an interesting window into the possibilities of translation within the context of political struggles [18].

To begin with, when trying to summarize Butler's postulates, Laclau provides us with a helpful definition: "cultural translation" would be "the deterritorialization of a certain content by adding something which, being outside the original context of enunciation, universalizes itself by multiplying the positions of enunciation from which that content derives its meaning". We will try to ascertain whether this definition can be extended to cover not only Butler's but any other concept of "cultural translation" and, perhaps, even what is usually known as interlingual translation. At the very least, it offers a refreshing alternative to the trite, pessimistic view of translation as a doomed endeavor, where anything that is added constitutes a mistake or a disloyalty: the copy that strives but never quite manages to match the original — translation as an impossible endeavor. Thus, while in their own way all our authors acknowledge this "impossibility," they all turn it on its head. For Balibar, translation is both "an impossible task" and a necessary one, the same adjectives that Ernesto Laclau uses to characterize the paradox at the heart of the construction of hegemony. Of course, if something like translation is "impossible" and simultaneously not only necessary, but an everyday reality, the real problem lies with our definition of the activity or our expectations about it. The actual impossibility is the "effort to establish universality as transcendent of cultural norms" the dream of cultural completeness that would allow the formulation of a general theory from within a single cosmovision [19].

In translation proper, to follow Jakobson's terminology (2004, p. 139), this impossibility is best understood by considering the problems associated with the tertium comparationis: often, when trying to determine the adequacy of a translation, scholars, implicitly or explicitly, take as a reference point a hypothetical intermediate invariant, that is accepted as "a universal given". The premise that we can have access to that universal invariant from a particular culture is necessarily predicated on the idea that there can be a monocultural affirmation of universality. The hidden subjectivity that is necessarily involved in such a process is analyzed, for instance, in Hermans' discussion of Toury's early theories. The partiality

of any translation, the inescapable choices involved in its elaboration, its contingency in other words, is not a flaw but "a necessary condition of the act" [20].

However, despite their apparent programmatic coincidence about the underlying notion, Laclau explicitly rejects Judith Butler's use of the term translation, because it "retains the teleological nuance of the possibility of a total substitution of one term by another". His line of reasoning connects with two legitimate objections to the use of the term "translation" in this wider, cultural-political framework that it would be remiss not to address.

First, there is the possible over-extension of the scope of translation, the problem we hinted at in the previous section: is the notion of "(inter)cultural translation" as a "general activity of communication between cultural groups" just a metaphor based on "proper," interlingual translation (Pym, 2014, p. 154)? Or is it possible to think of both concepts as referring to the same practice, so that they can be said to share a continuum or, even, a hierarchical relationship by which interlingual translation could be considered a particular case of intercultural translation, which would therefore become "translation" proper? The second issue: even assuming that both intercultural and interlingual translation ultimately refer to the same activity, is it strategically convenient to keep the same term in both cases?

Is it legitimate, then, to talk about cultural translation? In objecting to the term, Laclau could be assuming a hard divide between "translation" in the standard, restricted sense of the Jakobsian interlingual translation, that is, the "interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language" and translation in the extended meaning deployed by Butler (but also Santos and other authors) as outlined above. This is of capital importance for us since, by extending the meaning of translation in order to apply it to the political and ideological sphere, we could seem to be referring to something that has little to do with the generally accepted interpretation of the term — for instance, when Butler wonders: "Can a translation be made between the struggle against racism, for instance, and the struggle against homophobia…?"

This extended approach resembles what Santos defines as his second type of translation work, the one concerned with practices (while the first type, also called "diatopical hermeneutics", deals with knowledges). In those instances, "the work of translation focuses specifically on mutual intelligibility among forms of organisation and objectives and styles of action and types of struggle". However, he himself acknowledges that, even if intercultural translation is usually conceived as a metaphor, metaphors tend to become literalized with repeated use. This is in fact the case with the standard Western view of translation as transfer, itself a metaphor that is not necessarily shared by other cultures. Not only that, but any interlingual translation involves cultural considerations, so the line between interlingual and intercultural is blurry at best. This is an idea shared by Sherry Simon, for whom "there cannot be a clear-cut distinction between cultural translation and the ordinary kind, because … even the linguistic categories used to define translation are more than linguistic". For Santos, thus, the distinction between both kinds of translation is in the end one of "emphasis or perspective" and indeed, the other examples with which he illustrates the potential of diatopical hermeneutics are more word-bound, inasmuch as his terms of choice are culturemes with a whole worldview behind them. Thus, he brings together "the Western concept of human rights with the Islamic concept of umma and the Hindu concept of dharma," or the Western figure of the philosopher and the African figure of the sage. A similar continuity seems to be at work in the use Butler makes of her concept of "cultural translation," for which she, as mentioned, draws from G. C. Spivak and explicitly quotes from her foreword and afterword for the translation of Mahasweta Madi's book Imaginary Maps.

This suggests a continuity between the cultural factors involved in the interlingual translation of a text and Butler's concept of cultural translation as a recasting of Laclau's elaboration of the notion of (hegemonic) universality. In other words, while Butler and Santos certainly use "(inter)cultural translation" to refer to what Pym insightfully defines as "a process in which there is no start text and usually no fixed target text" they also seem to conceive it as a particular, politically-aware approach to the translation of texts. This continuity from interlingual to cultural translation seems to be shared by Balibar as well, when he proposes "stretching the idea of 'translation' from the merely linguistic to the broader cultural level" As a rule, Ngugi sticks to the "narrower," interlingual conception of translation, even though his ultimate goal is the creation of "a true commonwealth of cultures and literatures" and "a real dialogue between the literatures, languages and cultures of the different nationalities within any one country".

The legitimacy of such an expanded use of the term translation has of course been debated by scholars in the field. Douglas Robinson, for instance, introduces a similar concept with his translingual address, defined as "empathic exposure to and experience of at least two cultures—such as cisnormative and transgender, binary and nonbinary, Finnish and English—and the resulting ability to shift attitudinally, perspectivally, in moving from one to the other" In that regard, his notion (and Sakai's "heterolingual address" from which it is evolved) do not seem to "compete" on the same level as translation — they do not involve an alternative to translation but rather an approach to it. That being said, Robinson would appear to veer towards a clearly "cultural" understanding of the term, since he

claims to adopt the sociological model of translation developed and he himself defines translation as "an umbrella term" operating not only on national languages but also on "sexual, ideological, or scholarly discourses, or discursive orientations" (xii) — indeed a long way from any merely linguistic interpretation of the term. It would seem that there is some precedent, then, for the exploration of this expanded understanding of translation. However, other scholars have put forward objections to this notion that have more to do, perhaps, with connotation and expectations.

Indeed, some might object to this wider use of the term "translation" not so much because it is conceptually unsound, but because of the aforementioned "teleological" connotations. We already stated, following Toury, that a translation is anything presented or regarded as such in the target culture It is fair to say that many would take issue with the idea that translating between feminism and class struggle is, at the core, the same as translating a novel from English to Spanish, for instance. Therefore, the use of an alternative term could seem a sensible strategy so as not to raise unwarranted resistance, on the one hand, and to banish the specter of monocultural universalism implicit in the "transparent" understanding of translation, on the other. This is part of the reason why other terms have been proposed to refer to this broader activity, leaving "translation" as a sub-set within them: transfer, mediation, and so on.

With that in mind, is there any merit in clinging to the term "translation" over those alternatives? Because there is an option: translation is regulated by social norms, which means that, as a social and cultural construct, the notion of "acceptable" or "correct" translation is not set in stone. In the appropriate circumstances, norms can be subverted since they are not, per se, "neither true nor false". As a matter of fact, the poetics of any literary system has often more to do with ideology than with linguistic considerations and as such it can be resisted and subverted if necessary. But should it? The problem with establishing different terms for intercultural and interlingual translation is precisely that, by doing so, the latter fully retains the "nuance," the teleological suggestion of total transparency that obfuscates its ideological component. In other words, the illusion of "total substitution" so endemic in interlingual translation, is maintained and even reinforced by the existence of a separate practice under a different name —be it "equivalence" "transfer" or any other candidate— as a contrast. In a classical ideological maneuver, cultural translation could be perceived (and doubtlessly criticized from some quarters) as "political," with the usual corollary that "proper" translation (the one carried out in compliance with the dominant norms) is neutral and apolitical (faithful, selfless, invisible when done right). However, if our main contention is that no culture can fully contain the world, if we want a specific politics of contamination, of cultural impurity (Butler, 2000b, p. 276), to abide by the norms regarding "acceptable" translation could be counterproductive. This is why the authors we examined generally make a point to specify that their allegiance to translation assumes a counter-hegemonic approach to the activity, with a specific set of goals and priorities.

4 CONCLUSION

In our view, while the convergent projects of the authors we have studied here certainly invite a new, productive way of looking at social struggles and multiculturalism, they are also interesting as a prism through which an intriguing new conceptualization of even "proper", interlingual translation can be gleaned. Thus, taking into account what we have seen, it is not unreasonable to contend that translating a text is, first and foremost, to universalize it, and through it the culture it belongs to, by "multiplying the positions of enunciation" from which it "derives its meaning". Our response to commonly heard objections about what is lost, what is missing in the translation of any text, is that there is something missing in any original that can only be gained via translation and also, perhaps more importantly, something missing in the target culture that can only be provided by a translation.

One could almost say that universality, thus understood, is an emergent property arising from the collaborative interaction of those multiplied positions of enunciation. In that regard, any text and its translations can be conceived as a constellation of sorts, as Santos observed —not unlike systems within systems—, the exact configuration of which is in a state of constant evolution.ii However, this flux, this contingency, is not a deficiency of "really existing" translation as compared to what it should be. Nor is it a constant refining towards an ultimately unreachable goal, but a constitutive characteristic of it, because —whether we are dealing with written texts or political struggles— the only true universalism is a contingent, hegemonic one. The idea of a monocultural affirmation of universality is as chimeric, if not counterproductive, as the notion of truly creating the fabled translation "that reads just like the original." Thus, a text in its universalizing movement is in a constant state of flux along a horizontal axis of languages and cultures, but also along a vertical, transtemporal axis. It could be tempting to see this network as having a clear center, the original. And in fact, the existence of an original that precedes any translation, and thus resides on a different level, contrasts with what happens between, say, the feminist movement and the decolonial struggle, as Pym points out when implying that translation proper (as opposed to cultural

ii Here, it would be interesting to expand the notion in order to include any rewriting of a text as part of this universalizing process, following regrettably, exploring this idea is beyond the reach of this study translation has a start text. Nevertheless, we should be cautious before assigning the original that immutable, central position. For the sanctity of the original has suffered serious blows with the advent of post-structuralist theories, and in particular with Derrida and his positing of all texts as translations. No translation reads just like the original, but no original reads just like the original either. Not only that: to this pre-condition of any text, we have to add the fact that no original really stays the same after translation, due to what calls post-translation after-effects by providing an afterlife for them, as remarked, "translations shape their 'originals'". All in all, when translating between cultures we enter "an open-ended relational and reciprocal gesture of freedom putting into question the 'translator' and the 'original' itself".

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declared no conflicts of interest related to the material presented in this article.

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