

# IN OTHER WORDS

Journal of the Translators Association 1994 No 4

Editor: Peter Bush

Editorial Board: Michael Cunningham, Elizabeth Ganne,  
Aamer Hussein, Margaret Jull Costa, Ros Schwartz

## CONTENTS

Editorial	
	2
Notes from the Chair	
	3
Why Don't We Talk About Translation? <i>by Douglas Robinson</i>	
	5
The Visible Translator <i>by Susan Bassnett</i>	
	11
The Translator's Invisibility: the Evidence of Reviews <i>by Lawrence Venuti</i>	
	16
Translation and Translation Studies in the United States: the Struggle for Credibility and Legitimacy <i>by Michael Scott Doyle</i>	
	23
John Cayley: <i>The Ros Schwartz Profile</i>	
	29
'An Exact Art', George Steiner's Inaugural St. Jerome Lecture at the British Centre for Literary Translation <i>by Anthony Vivis</i>	
	32
News from Abroad: Actes Sud <i>by Jean Mattern</i>	
	36
The Hidden Hand <i>by Anne-Marie Glasheen</i>	
	39
Letters, News, Prizes	
	42
Book Reviews	
Grand Dictionnaire French/English-English/French <i>by Barbara Wright</i>	
	46
Translation/History/Culture & The Craft of Translation <i>by Isabel Quigly</i>	
	48
Dr. György Radó: <i>In Memoriam</i> <i>by Ewald Osers</i>	
	51

# TRANSLATION AND TRANSLATION STUDIES IN THE UNITED STATES: THE STRUGGLE FOR CREDIBILITY AND LEGITIMACY

By Michael Scott Doyle

A session at the recent 16th Annual Conference of the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) was entitled 'Status of the Art: Why We Don't Talk About Translation', intriguing for its bald irony in a forum where *we* do indeed talk about translation, and talk about it a lot. After all, that is what ALTA is all about: a rich discussion of translation theory and practice, of translation as art and craft, and of translation studies as an emergent humanistic discipline in its own right, a timely and exciting field of scholarly inquiry.

But the slightest peeling of the session title's onion layers of reference, and finger pointing, moves us quickly beyond the *we* of ALTA (although I shall return to this *we* later), and other such forums and communities that do spend a great deal of time talking about translation, to a broader consideration of the *we* who stand indicted by the title. That *we*, the Others, signals *we* as a society in general, and *we* in academia in general. It really refers to *them*, as in 'Why Don't *they* Talk About Translation'. Because the fact is that *they* all certainly make good use of translation. *They* frequently use the word itself, *translation* (as a metaphor, a heuristic

verbal device, to signify 'in other words... what this really means is... this becomes,' etc.), and *they* make constant use of translations, ranging from commerce to technology transfer, to literature and literary theory. Also, without knowing it, *they* themselves are all 'translators' (here I intentionally ignore the professional distinction between writing and orality in translation), incessantly engaged in the intra-linguistic communicative exercises that all senders of messages regularly resort to: 'No, that's not right. What I meant (to say) was', or 'Let me clarify... Let me explain... Let me put it differently'. *They* do translation, frequently use the word *translation*, and serve themselves of translations, but *they* seldom talk about it; *they* don't acknowledge it. It is like breathing air, something so fundamental that we all do it, but we generally don't talk about it.

So some of us - the few, the minority, the initiates - do talk about translation, more often than not comfortably in-house, as shop-talk with other translators. But most don't, and that is what Douglas Robinson, who proposed the ALTA session, is asking us to consider. And rather than phrase it as a question, 'Why

## *Translation and Translation Studies in the United States*

don't we talk about translation?', he presents it as a candid statement of fact: WHY DON'T WE TALK ABOUT TRANSLATION. With this, one enters into the realm of the sociology of translation and translation studies, the terrain of our considerations astutely mapped out by Robinson's focus on the 'Status of the Art'. Status, defined as 'the position of an individual [or topic] in relation to another or others, especially in regard to social or professional standing; the state or condition of affairs' (*Webster's*, inserts mine throughout), is a political issue: it is about power and place in the pecking order of things. Seeing it as such, I am interested in addressing the theme of 'Translation and Translation Studies in the 1990s: The Struggle for Credibility and Legitimacy'. And, in so doing, I will read into Robinson's session title some implied parentheses at the end: (*Why should We Talk About Translation?* and *Why We Should Talk more About Translation*). Beginning with some general observations, I will then focus on a crucial gatekeeper in these matters: our American institutions of higher learning.

Most people know very little about translation. They have never stopped to think about it. They have never been asked to stop and think about it. Yet it is always there, in what they do and make use of daily. They fail to realise the fundamental and functional role that translation plays in their lives: that we are all *homo translator*, that we all engage in re-expression and clarification of what it

is we mean to say (intra- as opposed to inter-linguistic translation), that we all access and utilise information and technology made available to us from around the globe, e.g. political and economic events elsewhere that impact on us, user's manuals that enable us to employ discoveries made first in another culture and language, important works of world literature that go into the constitution of the well-read, cultured individual. Most people never stop to think that the man-made world itself is an inter-semiotic translation of visions, ideas, needs, and desires into material forms such as clothing, furniture, buildings, roads, institutions, and communities, and into other intangible results such as action and policies. The biblical version of Western theology itself arguably presents the world as an act of translation, the Word that was made real (that was re-expressed and took on another shape) in what we call the Creation. God had an idea, a vision of things, and He translated that vision, the Word as symbol of thing-potential, into action and results. And here we are, on Planet Earth, still translating, still naming and re-naming, still creating through this core metaphor of human activity called translation.

By and large, translators have been an anonymous lot. Historically they have been marketed, and consciously marketed themselves, as invisible workers. They have been characterised, and have characterised themselves, as secondary and derivative, transparent beings through

whom the principals - the manager, the politician, the author - realised the more primary, and thereby it was assumed, more significant work. As an economist once said to me, 'Translation is like transportation, it doesn't make the product, it simply moves it'. My response, which covers an analogy of intra- and inter-linguistic, as well as inter-semiotic translation, should have been: 'But without transportation, how is the utility value of the product realised if it doesn't reach the hands and operations of the beneficiaries, the users and consumers? What is the real value of the product if it sits in a warehouse or at home in a garage or on somebody's desk?' Translators and interpreters historically have been willing participants in fostering an identity as unperceived, subsidiary, and marginal players because it was the accepted and proper thing to do. Yet the quality of the translation or interpretation - the transportation - attributable to a name, has been and remains an all-important factor: nobody wants to receive broken or damaged merchandise, bad translations, or poor work done by an interpreter in court or in negotiations. As a result, we *are* beginning to talk more about translation and interpretation in certain circles, wider than those before, because the consequences of the translator's or interpreter's work are increasingly being considered significant, and accountability must attach itself to a name, as must the just rewards. But generally we haven't talked much about translation because

historically so many have contributed to suppressing or factoring it out of the conversation. However, the translator or interpreter is not invisible. He or she is a real person who increasingly plays a significant, arguably primary, role in the shape and outcome of things - whether legal, commercial, diplomatic, or cultural - and this importance is increasingly being recognised. There are simply better and worse translators and interpreters, for better or worse results that have real consequences.

The status of the art and craft of translation has been a low one, not only in society in general, but in academia as well. Elsewhere (in *Translation Review 1991*) I have pointed out the irony of this situation, given the extent to which Western higher education, indeed the entire premise of Western education itself, relies on the results of translation for its own enterprise. Education, especially in this American era of heightened curricular globalisation, incorporates and makes use of ideas, theories, experiments, findings, breakthroughs, documents, and literature that originate from all corners of the world, utterances made first in another language and culture. English is not the *language* of discovery, of experimental or critical insight, or of Literature. It is but one of the many important languages that inform education and the generation, transmission, synthesis, and application of knowledge, both new and old. English is not the be-all and end-all in such matters, it is not self-sufficient. And because of

this, it needs to nourish and enrich itself by making available through itself what the rest of the world has to offer. This is how the English language and its users remain competitive and viable across many walks of life. It is a very real part of what makes English a power language. And, of course, such importation of what originated elsewhere is achieved by means of translation, by bringing foreign information, knowledge, and verbal art to and into English. Yet this seems to be a difficult acknowledgement and accommodation for American higher education to make. In terms of status, translation remains very low in the pecking order of activities and results considered significant in academia. This is a political issue, about power and hegemony; an issue of the stifling weight of unexamined convention, and of the jostle to create new space and place in an already crowded curricular landscape.

American higher education, our colleges and universities, has dealt with translation (or relegated it) in much the same way as has occurred in society at large. Despite its fundamental role in the entire enterprise of higher education, translation for too many years has been seen as a secondary and derivative activity, something that many scholars did politely and in private, i.e. an add-on to their *real* scholarly work. They didn't talk about translation because it wasn't kosher to do so, it wasn't prestigious enough in light of the 'state or condition of [academic] affairs' (*Webster's*), the unquestioned pecking

order of things in the hallways of learning. Translation was there, it was being done, it was being used, but it was in the closet, even when its value was more significant than that of the 'original' articles, essays, and other writings being generated by the very same scholars required to engage in this aspect of careerism. It was risky business because there was no school, no larger community, no strength in numbers to vet translation and translation studies as a fundamental academic activity and area of scholarly inquiry. It was blandly and un-self-critically accepted, and therefore complacently perpetuated, that translation was an inferior, collateral and non-essential factor in what we do in higher education.

There clearly has been an element of taboo, an institutionalised fear factor over 'professional standing', involved: 'a prohibition imposed by [academic] custom or as a protective measure [of academic turf]; banned on grounds of [academic] morality or taste; banned as constituting a risk [to an academic career]' (*Webster's*). Translation simply was not an acknowledged part of an academic ritual that Romantically privileged originality and the generation, as murkily opposed to the transmission, of new knowledge. Yet even a recent Nobel Laureate, Octavio Paz, has gone on record as saying that originality itself is always already an act of translation of ideas, feelings, and desires into words and images (*Literatura y literalidad*). And what should be said about the very industry of the critical

enterprise that characterises the humanities, given that criticism of a book or work of literature is itself by definition secondary, derivative, and often enough not very original but merely a formulaic application - painting by numbers - of a given theory, which itself often enough is an import from abroad? Despite expectations, not everybody in academia is an Einstein. What, then, about the value of bringing the work of an Einstein in any scholarly or artistic sense into a language and culture that is subsequently significantly enriched by the work of the translator, by the new space that the translator has created? The transmission itself of such knowledge and achievement is simultaneously a generation of new knowledge (insights and perspectives) in the receptor language and culture, as new possibilities are immediately opened up as a result, followed then by the generation of new home-grown knowledge, itself in turn secondary (because it was made possible by the translation), which in turn begets more new knowledge in the form of influence exerted and criticisms generated. And so it goes, from high-tech to literary considerations, this circle of knowledge that imports, makes the import domestic, and often re-exports as a transformed, uniquely applied, or more refined ('new and improved') product.

Often we (and here the indictment wraps back to the *we* of ALTA) don't talk

about translation because doing so is no easy or comfortable undertaking. Talking about it means bringing it to the attention of others, our colleagues, and addressing (defining, defending) issues such as credibility and legitimacy. It means speaking out in circles where the topic has been suppressed; it takes courage and conviction to speak up in a 'hostile' environment. But the point increasingly being made is that translation is fundamental and important, both in society at large and within academia, that it is unreasonable and improper to consider it otherwise. Translation and translation studies *are* becoming accepted as legitimate topics for discussion and debate, and as important 'new' areas of scholarly inquiry, albeit often historically reclaimed, redeemed, or rediscovered. ALTA and similar communities of vested interest must become ever more active in educating those around us, particularly our colleagues in academia, as to the role and impact of translation in their lives, occupations, disciplines, and careers. This message must continue to be convincingly carried across the various forums of higher education - **translation across the curriculum** - because, in the end, whatever occurs there, with these crucial gatekeepers of our society's knowledge, will have a most significant impact on the status of translation and translation studies in general.