Lost in Translation: The power of language

SANDY FARQUHAR & PETER FITZSIMONS

Faculty of Education, University of Auckland
Independent Researcher, Education & Management Services (NZ) Ltd.

Abstract

The paper examines some philosophical aspects of translation as a metaphor for education—a metaphor that avoids the closure of final definitions, in favour of an ongoing and tentative process of interpretation and revision. Translation, it is argued, is a complex process involving language, within and among cultures, and in the exercise of power. Drawing on Foucault’s analysis of power, Nietzschean contingency, and the inversion of meaning that characterises the work of Heidegger and Derrida, the paper points towards Ricoeur’s notion of linguistic hospitality as the ethical dimension to the inevitably inadequate representation of the ‘other’. In this exploration, translation is posited as a creative and interpretive act—involving neither image nor copy, but poetic transposition.

The power of language emerges in the close association between power and knowledge, in which the ability to define what is real generates the realm of future possibilities. From a Foucauldian perspective, language functions as a creative strategic relation—a form of power that structures the field of other possible actions. It is through the mediation of translation, the paper argues, that language communicates, leaving us with a world of difference (i.e. ‘lost in translation’), as both our curse and our blessing as part of the human condition and as part of our ethical endeavour as educators. The contingent and arbitrary nature of language problematises what appears natural and necessary, generating the possibility of creative dialogue.

Keywords: metaphor, interpretation, contingency, multiplicity, difference, communication

Introduction

The paper begins by locating language (and thus, translation) within a Foucauldian analysis of power as a strategy to generate and structure the realm of new possibilities. The interpretive play that accompanies linguistic communication is an open-ended and creative process that allows new meanings to proliferate. The paper then provides a brief genealogy of philosophical approaches to translation, tracing the work of Walter Benjamin and Roman Jakobson to suggest that translation is not merely the transposition of meaning from one language to another, promoting the idea that even within the same
linguistic community, phenomena and meaning are interpreted differently. To be ‘lost’ in translation is to accept both the contingency of language and our inability to fully encapsulate otherness within our frame of reference. This ethical dilemma is explored in terms of Ricoeur’s notion of linguistic hospitality, recognising that two worlds may not necessarily agree but that they can mutually co-exist. The paper concludes with an exploration of some creative possibilities for us as educators through the medium of translation.

Power and Translation

The power of language lies in its ability to create what is ‘real’: through image, metaphor and interpretation. The creative use of language is an influential mechanism in its structuring of social possibilities. It is the medium through which reality is communicated and interpreted. Translation is, thus, a mode of power in which language creates possibilities for multiplicity and difference. The phrase ‘lost in translation’ brings together both openness to new ideas and a willingness to embrace multiplicity. We explore the idea of being ‘lost’ as a commitment to engaging in a journey, to finding new meanings and trajectories, and to embracing destinations that are tentative and negotiable. We contend that translation is a commitment to openness and continuous reinterpretation, enhancing possibilities in our ethical endeavour as educators.

For Foucault power is not an institution, a structure, or a particular force with which certain people are endowed; it is the name given to a ‘complex strategic relation in a given society’ (Gordon, 1980, p. 236). The exercise of power is defined as the way in which ‘certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions’ (Foucault, 2001, p. 343). The way we speak establishes what we consider possible. Clearly then, language is a significant factor in the exercise of power. This is so in terms of how we structure possibilities for ourselves and others: how we relate to others while at the same time treating as tentative the social norms mapped out for us. Foucault dreams of a ‘new age of curiosity’ that might provide a broad contextual framework for ‘interrogating ourselves’, altering both our relation to truth and our way of behaving, and increasing the possibility for ‘movement backward and forward’. This curiosity involves:

... the care one takes of what exists and what might exist; a sharpened sense of reality, but one that is never immobilised before it; a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way; a passion of seizing what is happening now and what is disappearing; a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental. (Foucault, 1997, p. 325)

In an effort to increase the possibility for movement that Foucault refers to, we seize upon the notion of translation. In this paper, we argue that translation allows for
both the inevitable interpretive shift that accompanies any attempt at communication, while at the same time providing for the untranslatable—the surplus meaning (Ricoeur, 1976). Translation constitutes a paradigm for many exchanges—in language, within and among cultures, and between teacher and student. As a metaphor for education, we are interested in translation as communication, as crossing borders, as the creation of new meaning, and further, as human understanding with and in relation to others.

**In Search of a Common Language**

Translation can hardly solve the problem of meaning if any question remains about the terms that define translation itself. Without a common language, there is no way of knowing whether two parties really understand each other or whether they are in fact talking about the same things, even when they use the same words. We need at least some agreement about the use of basic terms, or at least a willingness to consider various proposals as possibly true and perhaps more plausible than others. What we (then) know is interpreted and tentative at best, ‘neither full nor final but fragmentary and temporary’ (Graham, 1985, p. 23).

In the Greek tradition, the art of translation/interpretation was incorporated in the notion of *hermeneus* (from *Hermes*, messenger of the gods—literally ‘the translator’, giving us the basis of today’s hermeneutics in philosophy and linguistics, in which essence is downplayed in favour of interpretation). Latin scholars also engaged with the transfer of meaning, using vocabulary such as *traducere, interpres, transferre, translatum*, all of which signify the shifting or transfer from one idiom to another and all of which are recognisable in today’s English derivatives as related to interpretation and transfer of meaning. The task of translation, then, is not new.

Walter Benjamin’s short but seminal work *The Task of the Translator* (1999), posits a loose correlation between translated text and originary meaning, distinguishing between two senses of translation: a strict sense in which the message is translated from one language to another; and a loose sense in which phenomena within the same linguistic community are interpreted differently (See Figure 1).
Jakobson (1959) accepts the interlingual function of translation, but differentiates between two versions of translation within the same linguistic community: the first is rewording, and the second is intersemiotic (transmutation) (See Figure 2). In these latter two, translation is definitional, whereas interlingual translation assumes a level of transparency.

From Benjamin and Jakobson, we are left with a dilemma about whether perfect translation is possible or whether translation is a mere approximation to an original. In accepting a level of uncertainty, any text is open to interpretation (subject to some criteria of adequacy in getting things right), yet also prone to error. But rather than think of getting things right or wrong, we might accept that many kinds of descriptions and many kinds of true statements are possible. In Nietzsche, Derrida and Ricoeur, translation is a creative and interpretive act, in which ‘translation is neither an image nor copy’ (Derrida, 1985 p. 180). If the translator neither restitutes nor copies an original, Derrida claims, it is because the original lives on and transforms itself. Translation, then, is more than just transformation; it involves growth or enlargement of the original—translation as ‘poetic transposition’ (p. 189).

Transposition of meaning is clear in the strong link between translation and metaphor. The Greek metaphor and the Latin translatum/transfero both denote a sense of ‘carrying over’, ‘carrying across’, or ‘transferring’. Turning his back on the idea of truth as a mirror of reality, Nietzsche casts all truth as illusion, as error and as ‘worn-out metaphors’ (1990c). Since, in a Kantian sense, subject and object are independent of each other, cognition in itself has no contact with the world. In other words, truth cannot be a mirror of reality; a concept is mere abstraction—a ‘condensate of multiple metaphors and metonymies’ (Kofman, 1993, p. 40) and ‘not derived from the essence of things’ (Nietzsche, 1990c, §1). Therefore, the idea of transference of meaning between subject and object is better explained by metaphor formation than by the exact replica implied in the mirroring model. Truth within the metaphor of translation, then, suggests the making of meaning from one’s existential predicament rather than from recognition of some ‘facts’ about the world.

Figure 2

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In the *Rule of Metaphor*, Ricoeur argues that metaphor abolishes the distance between concepts, makes their resemblances visible, and places things before us in new ways—to make ‘discourse appear to the senses’ (1977, p. 38). Like Nietzsche, he distinguishes between live and dead metaphors. A good metaphor, he says, tells us something new about reality, although it cannot encapsulate all the symbolic meaning. Metaphors are the ‘linguistic surface’ of symbols (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 69): the surplus of meaning—that which is residual in the symbol—necessitates ongoing translation, understanding and explanation.

In accepting surplus meaning as part of the process of translation, we adopt the view that translation does not provide a direct copy of the original; it is a transformation involving both addition to and subtraction from the original. Either way, the original meaning is changed—thus, at a superficial level, our commitment to the title of this paper. But there emerges a richer depth to the idea of being lost, if we go beyond the idea of something missing. Synonyms for the word *lost* include *misplaced, off-course, confused, forlorn*, and *deep in thought*, each nuance enhancing the notion of, and highlighting the tentative nature of, translation as an educational metaphor. To be ‘lost’, then, is to be engaged but uncertain about any final interpretation.

The notion of loss is inherent in the practice of *Heidegger* and *Derrida* of writing *under erasure*, to indicate the inexactness of the use of language in communicating underlying meaning. Rather than just being left out, extraneous meaning is included but signalled as tentative. We also suggest that erasure signals something *more*: the unexpressed or the unattainable. This uncertainty also underpins Richard Rorty’s notion of liberal irony. Liberal ironists are those who can live with hope while knowing there is none, those who combine ‘commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment’ (Rorty, 1989, p. 61).

Perhaps loss is more than just inevitable in the process; it may also be an educational good. Rather than considering loss as a *deficit*, we see a commitment to being lost as an acceptance of *openness*, as possible gain in perspective, or inspiration for new possibilities. The idea that the productive side of loss is gain is an opportunity to ‘create for ourselves our own new eyes and ever again new eyes that are even more our own’ (Nietzsche, 1974, §143).

The biblical story of Babel recounts the experience of the tribe of the Shems, traditionally considered as their attempt to reach the heavens by building a tower. God interrupted the project, smashing the tower and inflicting on humankind a legacy of incomplete communication. The story of Babel recounts, among other things, ‘the origin of the confusion of tongues, the irreducible multiplicity of idioms, the necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity as impossibility’ (Derrida, 1985, p. 171). Derrida interprets the Shems’ efforts to raise a tower, not just as an attempt to reach all the way to the heavens but also, according to the biblical text, to make a name for themselves through imposing a universal language—their own—on the rest of the world.

So they want to make a name for themselves—how will they do it? By imposing their tongue on the entire universe on the basis of this sublime edification. Tongue: actually the Hebrew word here is the word that signifies lip. Not tongue but lip. Thus, they want to impose their lip on the entire universe. Had
their enterprise succeeded, the universal tongue would have been a particular language imposed by violence, by force, by violent hegemony over the rest of the world. ... This, then, is their project: to make a name for themselves by imposing their lip on the world. (Derrida, 1985, pp. 100–101)

The tower of Babel, then, is not merely about the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it also signals an incompletion, the impossibility of a totalising system or structure. Ricoeur’s understanding of Babel is not that of catastrophe inflicted on humans by a jealous God but, like other commencement myths, a situation of separation—a starting point:

It is also possible to read this myth ... as a non-judgmental acknowledgement of an original separation ... this is how we are, this is how we exist, scattered and confounded, and called to what? Well ... to translation! There is a post-Babel defined by ‘the translators task’, to take up again the already mentioned title of Walter Benjamin’s famous essay. (Ricoeur, 2006, pp. 18–19)

For Ricoeur, translation is definitely a task, then, not in the sense of a restrictive obligation or a finite job requiring completion, but in the sense of open-ended engagement so that human action can simply continue. Translation is, then, more process than product—a sustained friction between text and culture, an opening up of future possibilities involving continuing dialogue and ongoing explanation and reinterpretation.

**Contingency in Translation**

Moving away from the idea of an original text with its various translations as merely imperfect representations, we give up the quest for an original essence or pure form. Nietzsche claims that the point at which a philosopher stops in the quest for truth is merely arbitrary, and does not signal any final or real knowledge: ‘Every philosophy also conceals a philosophy; every opinion is also a hiding-place, every word also a mask’ (Nietzsche, 1990a, §289). In other words, every translation is merely the next mask in succession, beyond which there are yet more masks. This infinite regress provides a kind of groundlessness, the sense of nostalgia and loss underpinning this paper, reminiscent of Nietzsche’s homily to ‘we the homeless ones’—those who can bear the icy reality of permanent contingency:

For their fate is hard, their hopes are uncertain, it is quite a feat to devise some comfort for them—but what avail! We children of the future, how could we be at home in this today! We feel disfavor for all ideals that might lead one to feel at home even in this fragile, broken time of transition; as for its ‘realities,’ we do not believe that they will last. The ice that still supports people today has become very thin: the wind that brings the thaw is blowing, we ourselves who are homeless constitute a force that breaks open ice and other all too thin ‘realities’. (Nietzsche, 1974, §377)

Convictions are, Nietzsche suggests, ‘more dangerous enemies of truth than lies’ (Nietzsche, 1986, I §483). An insistence on objective certainty masks feelings of weakness, and closes down the possibility of new and different perspectives—of ‘seeing the
world with more and different eyes' (Nietzsche, 1989, III §12). The world is text; translations are further text; in fact, it's text all the way down.2

As an analogy, Connolly (1991) undermines the binary distinction between identity and difference. His notion of identity is not a descriptive label that can be applied to an already existing self entity. Identity formation is a political process that rests on social definitions of difference, with the resulting identity not as an inherent truth about one’s being, but a self-reinforcing ‘circle of significations’. The contingent and relational nature of the process is emphasised as identity is constantly exceeded, subverted, obstructed, and confounded both by actors who resist roles for which they have been cast and by audiences ‘imperfectly colonised by the circle of significations within which the prevailing politics of identity moves’ (Connolly, 1991, p. 210). In this analysis, social life is ambiguous and political ‘reality’ can be challenged as ‘conventional categories of insistence’. Connolly draws upon Nietzschean genealogy to interrogate exclusions built into the idea of entrenched identities, to problematise and politicise the forms they have taken, and to ‘salute’ uncertainty and ambiguity. We can adopt a similar perspective in considering the identity of text—in both its ‘original’ form and its translation. As with social life, text is ambiguous and open to diverse interpretation. Any particular translation is contingent and relational, subject to the prevailing politics of convention.

Emphasising the need for a relational discourse, Chantal Mouffe advocates a ‘radical democracy’, acknowledging heterogeneity and leaving room for plurality and conflict. The human subject and its interpretive focus is thus shifting and changing in dialogue with its social surroundings:

... we are in fact always multiple and contradictory subjects, inhabitants of a diversity of communities (as many, really, as the social relations in which we participate and the subject-positions they define), constructed by a variety of discourses and precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of those subject-positions. (Mouffe, 1988, p. 44)

Such diversity is necessarily a space of tension and conflict, of mutual recognition of the other, and cannot be reduced to a single translation. Consequently, philosophers of education are turning to ‘post’ discourses for explanations of diversity. Within the postmodern condition, the artist and the writer are not governed by pre-established rules or judged according to predetermined categories. Rather, they are ‘working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done’ (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81). Lyotard suggests it is not our business to supply ‘reality’, or to provide a totalising unity for irreconcilable language games. The price for such a quest is too high, he warns:

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 81–82)

Nietzsche had a particular admiration for the artist as the creator of new metaphors for life. It was the artist who could affirm (rather than deny) reality and enhance it through a particular representation. The artist’s focus on ‘appearance’ was not an
inadequate signifier of some higher unattainable realm, but an engagement with reality as it presents, but ‘selected, strengthened, corrected’ (Nietzsche, 1990b, ‘Reason’ in Philosophy §6).

‘Appearance’ here signifies reality once more, only selected, strengthened, corrected ... The tragic artist is not a pessimist—it is precisely he who affirms all that is questionable and terrible in existence, he is Dionysian. (Nietzsche, 1990b, ‘Reason’ in Philosophy §6)

American English Professor, Richard Rand applies a similar logic to the art of poetry as a form of translation. Keats’ *Ode to Autumn*, he suggests, translates the inarticulate, silent meaningless forms of Autumn into the linguistic sublime (Rand, 1985). Rand goes further though, to argue that Autumn, personified in the ode, is responsible for the various acknowledgements of imagery, characters and events from Keats’ earlier poems, and so not only is Keats translating Autumn, the converse is also true: Autumn is translating Keats. In this mutual dependency, it is out of the question to speak of an essential ‘original’, since origins and identities are undecidable and it is difficult to tell where one leaves off and the other begins. We have, then, a reciprocal relationship between the artist and the work of art—a mutual exchange between creator and creation.

**Linguistic Hospitality**

Ricoeur illustrates this creative exchange in his threefold theory of mimesis. Integrating metaphor and interpretation, mimesis refers to the art of creating new meaning and understandings. The first part of mimesis refers to the shared understandings of individuals or communities; the second to the reconfiguration of meaning in which metaphor plays the role of re-presenting meaning in new ways; the third refers to the act of readership in which ‘the author’s intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide’ (Ricoeur, 1977, p. 29).

In translation, he suggests, it is always possible to translate otherwise, without ever hoping to bridge the gap between equivalence and perfect adhesion. Two languages are not the same nor reducible to each other: ‘Connotations, contexts and cultural characteristics will always exceed any slide rule of neat equations between tongues’ (Ricoeur, 2004, p. xvii). To ‘dream of the perfect translation’ is to ‘wish that translation would gain, gain without losing’, to recapture universality, and to attempt ‘to abolish the memory of the foreign and maybe the love of one’s own language’ (*ibid.*, p. 9). We must forgo the possibility of total translation. Notwithstanding the mourning for a *perfect* translation, we can best aim for a *good* translation. Translation, as an encounter to be embraced, is not, then, a quest for perfect meaning. There is a tension between, on the one hand, staying true to the author; and on the other hand, communicating effectively with the reader. For Ricoeur, such tension is not an insurmountable obstacle, but a fragile condition inherent in attempts at communication.

Translation sets out not only intellectual work, but also an ethical problem: to bring the reader to the author, and to bring the author to the reader, at the risk of serving and of betraying two masters. This dilemma emphasises the vigilance the translator must take in constantly checking the otherness of the other while remaining sincere to
the work, recognising that authentic relationships exist in tensional spaces. This is to
practise what Ricoeur refers to as linguistic hospitality: ‘the act of inhabiting the word
of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one’s own
home, one’s own dwelling (Ricoeur, 2006, p. xvi). Linguistic hospitality recognises a
small window of opportunity where two worlds may not necessarily agree but can
mutually co-exist.

A feature of translation is the ability to distance the subject from the production of the
text so that it can be viewed anew and from different perspectives. Appropriation and
alienation add a new dimension of agonistic engagement, ensuring that difference is
neither overcome nor normalised, but that it remains an important part of human
belonging. It is easy (if somewhat conventional) to acknowledge that the translator owes a
debt to the author of the original. But Derrida sees the converse as true as well: any author
is indebted to an eventual translator. The debt of translation is not only mutual and
reciprocal, it is insoluble as neither can possibly repay the other (Graham, 1985). Barthes’
assertion of the ‘death of the author’ refers not to the empirical or literal death of a given
author, but to the fact that, in a radical sense, the author is absent from the text.

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’
meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in
which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash ... but there
is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not,
as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the
quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost;
a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination ... the birth of the reader
must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (Barthes, 1977, p. 148)

Earlier, we noted the link between translation and metaphor and suggested that neither
translation nor metaphor mirror reality, but rather, they actively create new modes and
meanings. The metaphorical process required in translation resists our current categori-
sations of language. Metaphor is the part of language that invites us to interpret and
translate. Through metaphor we begin to see reality in terms of potential rather than
actuality: it simultaneously shatters and increases our sense of reality: ‘with metaphor we
experience the metamorphosis of both language and reality’ (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 85). To
translate, then, is to re-create and to re-state action, requiring a new translation in each
passing along of meaning. This new translation is not bound for a final destination, but
functions to restore and re-appropriate meaning, to reveal new modes of being and
understandings of each other.

In a sense, the translator is caught in a battle between, on the one hand, faithful
adherence; and on the other hand, the inevitable interpretive shift that accompanies any
attempt at communication. It is, indeed, at the moment of translation that the textual
battle comes into its own. Translation is a bridge that creates out of itself the two fields
of battle it separates. Heidegger could have been talking about translation when he wrote
of the bridge:

    It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as
banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them
to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge. Nor do the banks stretch along the stream as indifferent border strips of dry land. With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other’s neighbourhood. (Heidegger, 1997, p. 104)

Conclusion

So, having set out to explore translation as a metaphor for education, we have finished up with the author’s voice concealed, the text obscured, and ourselves lost in translation. What is clear, though, is the notion of translation as a complex paradigm for multiple exchanges: in language, within and among cultures, and in the exercise of power. Such complexity problematises any simple social reality.

Language is not just a series of message transfers between sender and receiver. In translation the original becomes larger; it grows rather than reproduces itself, ‘like a child ... but with the power to speak on its own’ (Derrida, 1985, p. 191), making of the ‘child’ something other than a reproduction. Translation provides a model that is both relational and creative. In education, a dialogical approach is called for, in which the child is seen not as an individuated subject under the authorial voice of the teacher, but as Zarathustra’s child, a powerful spirit able to will its own creation from innocence. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra describes three stages in the development of the spirit, all of which are important in the overcoming of nihilism. The first stage of development is signified by the camel, aware of the burden imposed by facing up to the challenges of life; second is the lion striking out for freedom by saying no to convention; and finally, the metamorphosis into the child, whose function is, unhampered by tradition, the creation of new values:

The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred ‘Yes’. For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred ‘Yes’ is needed: the spirit now wills his own will, and he who had been lost to the world now conquers his own world. (Nietzsche, 1982, 1, On the Three Metamorphoses)

The child is, we might say, lost in translation.

Notes

2. This is an analogy to infinite regression. An anecdote appears on Stephen Hawking’s (1996) book A Brief History of Time, which starts, ‘A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: “What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.” The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, “What is the tortoise standing on?” “You’re very clever, young man, very clever,” said the old lady. “But it’s turtles all the way down!”’.
References


