# Metaphors in the Discourse on Translation

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**Résumé:** L'article passe en revue quelques'unes des métaphores les plus connues, mais aussi des plus surprenantes qui jalonnent le discours scientifique de la traduction, en soulignant les avatars du Texte (texte-source, texte traduit) et son destin tumultueux.

Along time, people have never got tired of synthesizing things, concepts and realities from a metaphorical point of view. As complex and fascinating an issue as translation could not have been overlooked either; on the contrary, thousands of pages have been written and will definitely continue to be written on *translation* (metaphorically viewed, conceived or revisited).

The metaphors – meant either to enable us to reach a better understanding of the concept of translation, or enhance its very expressive potential – are countless; yet they could be ordered and organized into a somewhat coherent configuration, in which there are a few (to say the least) vigorous, (ever-)lasting concepts around which smaller satellites are allowed to gravitate.

Given the fact that translation was not really an issue in the classical world (as the literate spoke several languages and could very well interpret from one to another), and that, later on, Christian Church became virtually monolingual in order to incorporate Greek and Hebrew into the culture of late Antiquity, the necessity for translation and its theorization became imperious



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only during Renaissance, an era which wove a fine theory of translation based on its comparison with *clothing*, an enduring comparison which did not wear out, not even now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Since Renaissance up to date, a number of clothing metaphors have bloomed and withered. Henry Rider, for instance, offers, in the preface to his 1638 translation of Horace to English, an intriguing point of view:

> *Translations of Authors from one language to another are like old garments turned into new fashions in which though the stuff be still the same, yet the dye and trimming are altered, and in the making, here something added, there something cut away.*

More recently, the Mexican writer Alma Guillermoprieto said:

> *The best translators slip into the glove of a text and then turn it inside out into another language, and the whole thing comes out looking like a brand-new glove again.*

An error lies in the very fabric of this theory, as texts in different languages are never like the two sides of the same coin.

In her novel *Fugitive Pieces*, the Canadian Anne Michaels writes:

> *Reading a poem in translation… is like kissing a woman through a veil. Translation is a kind of transubstantiation; one poem becomes another. You can choose your philosophy of translation just like you choose to live: the free adaptation that sacrifices detail to meaning, the strict crib that sacrifices meaning to exactitude. The poet moves from life to language, the translator moves from language to life; both, like the immigrant, try to identify the invisible, what's between the lines, the mysterious implications.*

The obvious idea implied by this quote is that a poem in translation definitely lacks the authenticity of the original; more than this, its meaning is always hidden behind a layer whose thickness depends considerably on the translator's skills, not to mention the degree of opacity of the original.



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Lawrence Venuti's standpoint opposes most others regarding translation; while speaking about it in terms of *clothing*, he rejects the idea of perfection, considering, more like the Renaissance scholars, that translation is a matter of "borrowed garments" more than of perfectly tailored gowns:

> *The translator is no stand-in or ventriloquist for the foreign author, but a resourceful imitator who rewrites the original to appeal to another audience in a different language and culture, often in a different period. This audience ultimately takes priority, insuring that the verbal clothing the translator cuts for the foreign work never fits exactly.*

If translation is visibly the "wrong size", this is due either to the translator's concern for the target audience or his/her faithfulness to the source text.

Another type of metaphor that proved to be very prolific in the theory of translation and which managed to "nourish", if only temporarily, the need for sensational of a great number of "insatiable" theory-addicts, is represented by the *food metaphors*, which we could divide into *food metaphors* proper and *digestive metaphors*.

A good starting point for "food metaphors" would be Alistair Elliot (an English poet and translator)'s view; according to him, translating is like trying to make powdered eggs into something like the original egg, by mixing them with water. The metaphor, as absurd as it may seem, emphasizes paradoxically (but efficiently) the very absurdity of endlessly comparing a translated text with its original source text. On the other hand, it also promotes the utter inferiority of the translated text to the source text. In a commentary which appeared on a site about (http://brave-new-words.blogspot.com) translation (dated October 26th, 2006), B. J. Epstein had a vehement reaction to "powdered eggs", by suggesting something equally shocking:

> *…I think most good translations deserve more than to be called powdered eggs. Translators take eggs and crack them open, then add a few ingredients in an attempt to make a good dish out of them. The dish recognizably includes eggs,*



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> *but isn't exactly eggs anymore. Maybe we can consider translations omelettes, rather than powdered eggs* (emphasis mine).

Coming from Brazil, the so-called "digestive metaphor" focuses on the image of *the translator as a cannibal*, devouring the source text in a ritual that results in the creation of something completely new. This "cannibalistic" notion of translation implies that the value of an original text is bound to its reception in the target culture.

This metaphor of anthropophagy, first used by Oswald de Andrade in *Manifesto Antropófago* in the 1920s and springing from the story of the ritual devouring of a Portuguese bishop by the members of the Tupinambà tribe in the 16th century Brazil, has been constantly "gorged" and "ruminated" over since the 1960s. The *rumination metaphor* could easily be considered a sub-category of the digestive metaphors, although hardly as violent as that of cannibalism, which transforms the translator into a vicious Jack-the-Ripper, capturing and raping the Text, and mutilating it beyond recognition.

From *anthropophagy* we move up an entry to *anthropology*, as translation "is best defined as that branch of anthropology in which the field comes to the office" (Rajendra Singh), and anthropotranslators take a very keen interest in what lies beyond the linguistic level, thoroughly researching every aspect of the two cultures they work with concomitantly.

Translation is more often than not ascribed human characteristics and / or emphasized by analogy with other human occupations. One of them is *(re-)building.* In his book *The Translator as Writer*, Michael Hanne mentions translator Margaret Sayers Peden's favourite figure of speech regarding translation; she suggests that translators of literary texts act like the curators transporting an old timber structure such as a log cabin to another location:

> *…carefully we mark the logs by number, dismantle them, and reconstruct them in new territory, artfully restoring the logs*



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*to their original relationships and binding them together with a minimal application of mortar.*

Although an attractive image, one cannot extract but the demolition-followed-by-reconstruction process out of this metaphor, and throw the rest away, as it is obvious that in translating, we do not work with the same "logs".

A certain delicacy of execution is suggested by associating the work of a translator with that of a *clockmaker*. In 2004 at Poesidagarna, on the occasion of an annual poetry festival, the Dutch poet Micheal Kuijipers, who publishes poetry under the pseudonym K. Michel, compared translation to taking apart a clock. In order to understand how a clock works, one takes it apart and studies the pieces and then puts it back together; the same with a poem, only that you put it back together in another language. Thus, the Lithuanian poet Tomas Venclova offers his (potential) translators a short-cut to the depth(s) of his poems by writing a detailed explanation of what he meant and possibly a first draft of translation, if he knows the target language…

Translators have also been assimilated with *technicians* or *gardeners* (see Shelley below), but more often with enduring or even humiliating/ed conditions like that of a *servant*, a *(subversive) scribe* (Suzanne Jill Levine), a *beggar at the church door* (Larbaud).

Not only metaphors verging on the "animal" or "human" side proved to be productive; *botanical metaphors* also found a fertile soil for debate, and perhaps the best known belongs to Percy Bysshe Shelley (*A Defense of Poetry*):

*It were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower – and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel.*

In the 18th century, people also used to associate translation with *a mirror or a portrait*. In the 20th century, George Steiner revisits the *metaphor of the mirror* and observed that good translations, like mirrors, not only reflect, but also generate light. In



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1981, André Levefere (*Translated Literature: Towards an Integrated Theory*), inspired by this metaphor of the mirror, coined the term *refraction*, which occurs in "texts that have been processed for a certain audience – children, for example –, or adapted to a certain poetics or a certain ideology". Thus, translations are viewed as distorted, not transparent reflections of their originals.

*Colonialist metaphors* (opposing the "conquering" and the "colonizing" text) and *class relationship metaphors* (according to which the "original captive" is never to be re-stored but hopelessly estranged) offer the perfect setting for the display of manipulation in the service of power.

*Sexual metaphors* cover a wide thematic area, from the famous "belles infidèles" (a tag invented in the 17th century which relegates translations – and, implicitly, women –, to a secondary, marginal role) to Oedipus or anti-Oedipus. The history of translation offers many examples of association of the translating process with acts of (sexual) aggression and invasion. If traditional metaphors on translation bring forward the notion of *translator as a guardian of the purity of the text*, in the 20th century, we face feminist reactions against automatically associating translating with the notions of infidelity (to be replaced with a translation method of love and surrender; see Gayatri Spivak), and Freudian theorists, which tend to describe translation as sexual possession and as a variant of the Oedipus complex. Serge Gavronsky, for example, considers the translator (symbolically) as *the child of the father creator*, his rival, while *the text* would be *the object of desire*. The fundamentally patriarchal model of authority (where the son-translator either obeys or destroys the father-author) is nowadays in competition with the adepts of anti-Oedipian theory, according to which the textual concentration on the "originary moment" (the primal scene of writing) and "the Original" (text) is far too limiting.

Other metaphorical representations of translation never fail to appear*: translation as treason*, as *survival*, *taboo*, *shadowy presence* (Steiner), *malinchismo* (Mexican term meaning more or less 'selling out to foreigners"), *road, diaspora, exile, criticism /*



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*re-creation* (Ezra Pound), (the Tower of) *Babel*, *Bible*, *scripture* (the "father-text" and the "unholy" source text); translating as unlocking the prison of language, following the steps of the original author, attempting the impossible, or searching for jewels in a casket etc.

Metaphors in / about translation are all creative (even if more or less pertinent), and if in the previous centuries they were concerned primarily with tattered dichotomies such as *traduttore / traditore*, *translatability vs. intranslatability* etc., the more recent have become more and more complex, even if they lack the plasticity of the ones before. Nevertheless, the attempt to find the naked facts in translation goes compulsorily through the stage of cloaking them first in a fancy theory.

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