TRANSLATING BETWEEN TRANS-FERRING AND TRANS-FORMING

Dan Mateescu

Abstract: This paper analyzes the role of translators/interpreters in a world in which intercultural exchanges have multiplied dramatically. If traditionally the translator has been a mediator between different linguistic and cultural universes, his role is even more important nowadays when modern technology facilitates human interaction making geographic and chronological distances dwindle. I first look at the analysis Tzvetan Todorov makes of one of the most spectacular cases of cultural clashes in the recorded history of mankind: the discovery and conquest of America by the Spaniards. Then I try to draw a parallel between the role translators/interpreters (or often their absence) played in those tragic events and their role in two crucial moments of our history, respectively: the late 19th century and the end of the following one.

Keywords: translating, cultural differences, borrowings, acculturation

1. Introduction

My paper discusses the problems facing translators in a world in which communication between persons that are distant geographically, linguistically and culturally is an everyday reality. If in a post-Babel world linguistic and cultural differences have been, for thousands of years, a permanently challenging obstacle, making translating and interpreting essential, indispensable activities[1], the society we live in has paradoxically amplified and diversified the difficulties translators have to cope with. This is because technological progress facilitates the instantaneous transfer of information over huge distances without, however, bridging the often tremendous gaps of all kinds separating humans living all over the world. In the past, the contact between entirely different civilizations that could only be considered to be contemporary from a theoretical and strictly chronological point of view, was in most cases accidental and had various effects, from the ingenuous admiration of Marco Polo travelling to China and trying to understand a world so unlike his own, to the brutality of the European conquerors of the New World who violently imposed their cultural patterns onto societies whose different identity they chose to ignore. At present, internationalization forces upon mankind unifying linguistic and cultural patterns. Being a "citizen of the world" and preserving at the same time your identity is one of the main problems you need to find solutions to. By definition a translator is a go-between (see the etymology of the word, from the Latin *tranferre-translatum*), therefore he is called upon to play an essential role in this process of smoothing the inevitable asperities that often make such contacts strenuous.

1. Tzevatan Todorov: *La Conquête de l'Amérique: La question de l'autre*

1.1 The first stage: Columbus the discoverer

I chose as a starting point of my paper Tzvetan Todorov's book *La Conquête de l'Amérique: La question de l'autre*[2]. One of the main topics discussed in the book is *otherness*

[1] See Steiner (1975).
[2] All references henceforth are to the pages in the Romanian version.

BDD-A9854 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:17 UTC)

and how human beings deal with it. Todorov analyses the clash between the Spaniards led by Columbus and later generations of *conquistadores* and the native Americans as a tragic case of disfunctional communication. He sensibly argues that the encounter between the European civilisation and that of the Amerindians is the most intriguing and most spectacular cultural shock that mankind has ever experienced. If the Europeans were already familiar with the notion of cultural diversity and had had the opportunity of recording such differences from their contacts with North African or Asian civilisations (the famous expedition led by Marco Polo in the 13th century is one such example) what happened in the late 15th century and in the following one was something unparalleled, considering the impact it had on both the civilisation of the western hemisphere (the greatest genocide in the history of mankind as Todorov calls it) and on the European civilisation, for which it represents the beginning of a new era.

The first expeditions are organized under the sign of confusion and misunderstanding. The Spaniards are sailing west and are expecting to reach the fabulous lands of Kublai Khan described by Marco Polo. With a fictional reality in their minds (the famous account of Marco Polos's travels) they are amazed to discover a world quite different from the one depicted in the famous Venetian's book. Even before contemplating military conquest, the first thing the Spaniards do is to rename the places they come across. This actually represents, as Todorov points out, their taking possession of the new territories linguistically. By renaming the places, they give them a new ontological status, just as Adam chose names for different entities after Creation. They do this being perfectly aware of the fact that all these places and realities *do* have their own names. As the French author remarks, the Spaniards are keen on chosing a significant nomenclature for the world they are discovering and beginning to shape on the pattern of their own. Confronted with alterity, their response is to utterly ignore it. Columbus is no linguist, he is a bad communicator, according to Todorov, unaware of, or refusing to accept, linguistic and cultural differences, which he prefers to completely disregard.

The first encounters with the natives are grotesque. The Spaniards are even unsure of the biological status of the people they meet, some considering them a sort of strange animals. Beside their nakedness (something the Spaniards consider to be entirely unacceptable for a human being) and their strange aspect, the sounds they utter are at first reluctatly recognized by the Spaniards as speech sounds. At one moment, Columbus notes in his diary that he thinks of taking them to Spain and teaching them to speak (Todorov notes[3] that, horrified by the brutality of the original, later French translations – at that time people knew better! – rendered the Spanish text by "teaching them to speak *our language*" [my emphasis] (see the chapters *Colon the hermeneutist* and *Colon and the Indians* in the above mentioned book).

In spite of the obvious failure of any kind of functional communication, Columbus persists in behaving as if his understanding of the newly discovered world improved by the day. Being a polyglot himself, he thinks he identifies in the words used by the natives words that are familiar to him, especially words in the Romance languages he can speak. His famous stubborness manifests itself at a linguistic level, too. He cannot, or at least seems to be utterly unable to, imagine a world that is structured on the basis of principles that are different from those governing his own world. If these are human beings and they have an organized society, this must be a copy (even though imperfect) of the society he comes from. If what they use as a means of communication is a language, this must be some sort of Spanish or at least a corrupt variant of it. It is his mission as a faithful subject of the Spanish king and as a Christian crusader to restore this world to its original purity and to correct its diformities and deviations from the ideal pattern.

[3] Todorov (1994: 31).

BDD-A9854 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:17 UTC)

The dialogues he has with the Indians, as mentioned in his and his companions' diaries, are often hilarious, verging on the absurd. His entire hermeneutical effort hinges, at least at the beginning, on his preconceived idea that he is somewhere in China. Combined with his linguistic inventiveness and insistence on hearing what he would like to hear, this leads to the interpretation of the word *Cariba* for instance (that was later to be used as a toponym) that the Indians use to refer to the inhabitants of the Caribbean islands, as *caniba* which is, to him, both a reference to the Khan, their supposed leader, and to dogs (by association with the Romance root); he believes, indeed, that his interlocutors are speaking about fantastic, dog-headed creatures.[4] What puzzles us is, as Todorov shows, not the fact that communication is difficult, if not altogether impossible, but that Columbus fiercely sticks to the illusion that he *understands* what the Indians tell him. What he "understands", in fact, is the perpetual confirmation of the pre-established, exclusively text-based representation he has of the world that Marco Polo had described centuries before and that he believes is the one unfolding in front of his eyes. He is often the grotesque, Quixotic embodiment of a dreamer that tries to fit the real world into the patterns of fictional worlds that books have deeply rooted into his brain.

One of the main reasons for Columbus's failure to successfully communicate with the Indians and ultimately to understand the universe he is about to discover is his utter ignorance of the importance of conventions. He repeatedly expresses his amazement at the different patterns of behaviour he witnesses. He is shocked at the fact that the Indians are ready to give him gold objects in exchange for trifles (a classic bewilderment of the Europeans in their trading with various extra-European civilizations) ignoring the fact that the value of objects is contextual and conventional and not absolute and universal. Similarly, the conventional nature of language is something he is completly ignorant of. The fact that his interlocutors use a different code of commnication is considered by him merely accidental, a deviation from the norm, the unique possible norm of his mother tongue.

According to Todorov[5], Columbus's attitude towards the natives epitomizes the attitude of the colonisers towards the colonised. It basically oscillates between ignoring the difference (in this case he considers the Indians his fellow human beings, his equals, equality meaning identity and identity necessarily bringing in the idea of assimilation) or acknowledging it, this leading instantly to the notion of the superiority of the Spaniards over the natives and to the necessity of the latter adapting to, and being fitted into, the Spanish way of life. Either way the new, trans-Atlantic world he is exploring must borrow the face of the old world he is coming from.

The essentially difficult dialogue is replaced by an in-forming monologue. The natives must be taken to Spain, be educated there, be taught how to speak and to behave and then return to their world where they will function as interpreters or agents of change of their society into a new one, shaped after the Spanish model. Conversion to Chistianity (we must never forget that Columbus mainly thought of himself as a crusader, a missionary), wearing European clothes, learning and speaking Spanish are therefore necessary stages in the process of these people (re)gaining their human status. It is Columbus's and his fellow countrymen's mission to redeem them, to restore them to a superior ontological status from which they seem to have decayed into barbarity.

[4] Todorov (1994: 31).
[5] Todorov (1994: 41ff.)

BDD-A9854 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:17 UTC)

1.2. The next stage. Cortés and the actual appropriation of the new world by the Spanish

The discovery thus begins on a linguistic level. The relatively innocent and peaceful beginnings of the first bewildering contacts are soon replaced by the brutality and efficiency of the system of taking possession the Spaniards deploy. Language continues to play an essential role during this stage, too. Unlike Columbus, who rejoices in the novelty of the world he explores, Cortés is a calculated, organized politician. He comes to Mexico with a very clear idea in mind, that of taking possession of the country and of transforming it into a Spanish colony. He often clashes with his own people who, unaware of, or indifferent to, his long-term projects are rather more interested in looting killing and raping. As any astute leader, Cortés is aware of the importance of information. If Columbus before him had been a rather poor hermeneutist, oblivious of the rich semiotic universe he was entering, Cortés, on the contrary, is very keen on understanding the world he is gong to conquer, in getting as much information as possible about it. One of the first things he does upon arriving in Mexico is to acquire the services of a skilled interpreter. A quarter of a century after Columbus first landed in the New World the first stage of mutual incomprehensibility is overcome. Both Spaniards and natives are beginning to learn something about each other's language and customs. The dialogue of the deaf is replaced by some sort of communication, of a very imperfect kind, still information circulates both ways.

Ironically, linguistic diversity plays a trick on Cortés too, since his translator only speaks Mayan and he has a very vague idea of the Aztec language[6]. Still the Spaniards manage to collect a lot of extremely useful intelligence on the people whose empire they are preparing to conquer. As for interpreting proper, if Aguilar's skills in the Mayan language prove to be of little use to the Spaniards, a woman will play an essential role in mediating the contacts at the highest level. Her name is Malinche and she is, indeed, one of the most (in)famous[7] interpreters in the recorded history of mankind. As Todorov points out, her role in the decisive events that dramatically changed the history of her country can hardly be overestimated. Cortés and the woman are inseparable. Bernal Diaz points out that Cortés could not negotiate an deal with the Indians in her absence. The crucial first encounter between Cortés and Moctezuma is depicted as having the interpreter, Malinche, in between the two military leaders. The interpreter thus occupies the centre of the picture as befits her role as go-between, as cultural and linguistic mediator.

Todorov considers that one of the most important explanations for the surprising victory of the Spaniards was their superior handling of the language. While for the Indians language was simply a mean of communication, of relating themselves to the others and the variety of the idioms they spoke testifies to their ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity (which ultimately translated into their lack of unity and co-ordination in their response to the common enemy), the Spaniards by comparison display a remarkable coherence in their actions and, additionally, prove to be very skilled in using language as a means of manipulating their adversaries. By masterfully controlling the information they get and using it to their advantage the Spaniards will manage to turn the table and win a war they are waging against all odds.

We must not forget that the (re)conquest is a topical notion for early 16th century Spaniards. Having recently re-conquered their country from the pagans they have also chosen

[6] Todorov (1994: 97).

[7] Todorov notes that, for the Mexicans, the woman interpreter has remained to this day a symbol of collaboration with the enemy and of the betrayal of national interests.

BDD-A9854 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:17 UTC)

to expel from the newly regained territories everybody who doesn't fit into the cultural and religious patterns of the newly liberated state. What they do in Mexico and in what was later to be called Latin America is simply to export these patterns to the western hemisphere of whose existence they were completely ignorant not long before. The famous meeting between Moctezuma and Cortés, which has acquired an almost mythic status, was somehow doomed to fail. Suspicion and ignorance of the opponent left little room for an amiable agreement. Faulty communication and mutual misunderstanding ultimately led to open conflict. Both linguistic and cultural differences contribute to the dramatic denouement. The attempt of the Spaniards at converting the natives and the response they get from Moctezuma are misinterpreted by the two parties respectively and the misunderstanding turns into bloodshed.

Beyond the details of a failed negotiation, lies, more importantly, the well designed Spanish plan for the conquest. Arguably, the respective personalities of the two leaders played an important part in the unfolding of the events. Cortés's military and administrative genius was in no way matched by the indecisive, weak Moctezuma. Language had again a key role in the aftermath of the military victories. If Columbus's men were not interested in linguistic details, Cortés's conquistadors and their followers were much more careful about such things. They knew the importance of language and the importance of writing. They rewrote the history of the conquered nations in their own language carefully[8] and systematically destroying the natives' accounts and chronicles[9]. This act, that the conquerors tried to justify by their religious fervour (the texts they destroyed were "heathen" texts)[10], had in fact much more important cultural and political motivations and consequences. Translation as mediation was abandoned in favour of trans-lation as substitution. As shown by Todorov, it is difficult to reconstruct the image the victims had of their victors in the absence of written accounts that present their side of the story. The most violent process of acculturation known in history follows. Even in the absence of reliable sources and of accurate data the figures are appalling. Estimates of the number of victims place it to up to 90% of the initial indigenous population. In actual figures, that would represent tens of millions of people justifying the French author's labeling it as the most extensive genocide in history[11]. Since 16th century Spaniards did not have the means of destruction of the 20th century natural disasters must have combined with their actions to yield such terrible, catastrophic results. (It is known for instance that diseases brought by the Europeans to which the Indians were particularly vulnerable also took a tremendous toll).

Beyond the bare figures what could motivate such a savage approach that led to such extensive loss of lives and to all but the annihilation of the natives' world? The Spanish chronicles hardly speak about hatred and a coherent plan of destruction; they rather testify to the bewilderment and admiration the conquerors often had for the world they came to discover and to understand (which was, however, paradoxically mixed with an overwhelming feeling of superiority over the Indians). In the absence of the natives' voice, silenced by the conquerors, our one-sided outlook on the events is inevitably incomplete and biased.

What mainly explains the extraordinary success of the Spaniards in their confrontation with the various American civilizations is, according to Todorov[12], their ability (a distinct trait

[8] See, for instance, Las Casas (1971).
[9] See de la Vega (1974).
[10] Todorov (1994: 187) quotes from D. de Landa's *The Maya. Account of the affairs of Yucatan*: "We found a great number of books written in those Indian letters and since there was none that didn't contain the Devil's lies and superstitions we burnt them all; they were in great distress to see this and this caused them a lot of pain".
[11] Todorov (1994: 175).
[12] Todorov (1994: 229ff.)

BDD-A9854 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:17 UTC)

of the Europeans in general) of understanding the *others* (my emphasis). It is the extraordinary versatility of the Spanish (European) civilisation that made it so efficient and ensured its universal expansion. The process comprises two stages. In an initial, mimetic one, the conqueror identifies himself, empathically, with the conquered. This may include learning their language, adopting their habits, copying their behavior. Alterity seem thus to be annihilated by the effort of the agent of identifying himself with the patient. Getting under the other's skin, metaphorically but sometimes literally (see Todorov's exemplification of Cortés impersonating Quetzalcoatl in order to terrify the Indians) provides the conqueror with the advantage of fully understanding the other, of borrowing its personality. But this loss of identity and the dissolution of alterity into identity are only an illusion. The following stage includes the assimilation of the indigenous culture by that of the conquerors. The assimilator reaffirms his identity, which he had never really abandoned, and shapes the identity of the assimilee upon it. Stooping to a position of *under-standing,* he never abandons the consciousness of his superiority and the project of trans-forming and re-moulding the other on his own pattern. The Spanish (European) culture thus remarkably combines flexibility and adaptability with inventiveness and improvisation and an unbending will of domination and of imposing its patterns onto the others.[13]

2. Cultural identity and trans-lations in 19th century Romania

The hypothesis my paper starts from, trying to prove its validity, is that, to a certain extent, we can draw a parallel between the situations described by Todorov and the realities our country was confronted with at various moments in its more distant or recent history.

At the begining of the 19th century, the Romanian principalities faced a thorny problem: that of defining their own identity. Centuries of Ottoman domination had largely effaced the western cultural heritage that the Romanians had benefited from in the Middle Ages and the early modern period. On the other hand, the glamour of western civilization and the vague memories of a long forgotten heredity naturally pushed Romania westwards. Strangely enough, and somehow premonitorily for a continued history of mixed influences, the first coherent attempts at modernisation (westernization) came from the east, during the Russian occupation of the Principalities.

One of the best known reports written in Romanian on the painful encounter between our ancestors and the Western world in the 19th century is Dinicu Golescu's account of his journey to different western countries. A similar shock is experienced by Nicolae Filimon, the first Romanian novelist. Golescu and his contemporaries were appalled to discover how hideous their native land looked if compared to the "civilised" West. A tremendous cultural and historical gap separated the two worlds. Romania's awakening to the realities of 19th century Europe was therefore not the idyllic story of Sleeping Beauty revived by the prince's kiss, but rather the nightmarish return of Rip van Winkle into a world which had evolved during his slumber and into which he is a perpetual misfit.

What was the solution their generation proposed? Massive translation, in all the senses of the word, beginning with the etymological one: transfer of cultural patterns, institutions, as well as translations of literary masterpieces of western literatures to shape our nascent literary language. Heliade Rădulescu is one of the most ardent promoters of the new trend. A prolific translator and a gifted writer himself, he theorizes about the importance of cultural models.

[13] Todorov (1994: 230).

BDD-A9854 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:17 UTC)

The extraordinary capacity of our people for adapting to and adopting the most diverse cultural contexts, its trademark versatility both in linguistic and in more general, cultural terms, is brilliantly demonstrated once again[14]. But trans-lations come with a price. The results are often mixed. Notoriously, in the 1860s Titu Maiorescu complained of the side effects. The text (*Against the current trend in Romanian culture*, 1868) has been a major cultural reference ever since.

> Plunged into Oriental barbarity up to the beginning of the 19th century, the Romanian society woke up from its lethargy...our youth embarked upon that extraordinary exodus to the fountains of science of France and Germany, an ever incresing tendency which has lent Romania some of the varnish of foreign societies. Unfortunately, however, just the external varnish! As our youth were unprepared and still are, [they were] stunned by the glorious phenomena of modern culture, they were attracted by the effects without getting to their causes, they were aware only of the outwardly manifestations of civilization without being aware of their much deeper historic roots...and now our younger generations come back to their country firmly decided to imitate and reproduce the appearances of western culture, being convinced that they will thus achieve in the speediest way, the literature, the science, the fine arts and, above all, the liberty of a modern state[15].

Needless to say that Maiorescu was not happy at all about the hasty and immoderate import of foreign literary works. Translating cannot represent a substitute for the original literature. Patience is what he recommends. A cultural tradition cannot be built overnight and can only be rooted in the nation's creativity.

> We don't have literary activity and – quite typically – no novels or short stories are being written, *they are all translated* [my emphasis]. Even poetry seemed to have disappeared, fiction was in the most lamentable state [...] In time, this will change [...] after a few generations and a taste for aesthetic productions will be born.[16]

In spite of Maiorescu's misgivings the (positive) impact of translating on the development of late 19th century Romanian literature cannot be denied. What he protested against was rather the excess. We should not go from one extreme to the other and ban the translators from our world.

Modern Romania was thus born (at least partly) under the curse of a hasty and massive cultural, literary and institutional transfer. With an enthusiasm typical of neophytes, the Romanian intellectuals of the late 19th century would have liked to see their country instantly resuming its place among (western) European civilizations after centuries of Turkish domination and influence. During the following decades, the problem of Romania's cultural identity, its relation with western cultures, the "synchronism" of our culture and the western ones or our lagging behind the west represented controversial and vividly debated subjects. In the long term Maiorescu seemed to be right. The initially "empty forms" imported from the west started acquiring substance and with all its obsessions and complexes, towards the

[14] It should be noted, however, that unlike in the case of the versatility of western cultural models that end up by assimilating thh cultures they come into contact with, our versatility often results in a complete loss of identity.
[15] The quote is translated from the Romanian original in Maiorescu (1978: 147).
[16] From *The new trend in Romanian poetry and fiction*, originally published in 1872 and reprinted in Maiorescu (1978: 184).

BDD-A9854 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:17 UTC)

middle of the 20th century, Romania had significantly reduced the gap separating it from the west. Like young painters that start their career by copying the old masters our country seemed to have come of age and achieved the maturity at which some degree of originality can be detected. The disastrous end of World War II and the fifty years of communism meant the severing of almost all ties with the western civilization and with the values of the world Romania had become a part of. At the end of the century Romania was again facing the traditional Sisyphean task of bridging the ever wider gap separating it from the west.

3. New challenges at the beginning of a new century. The role of translators and trans-lations

More than a century and a quarter after its publication, Maiorescu's familiar warning has a special resonance in our ears. In the 1990s, waking up from a new and more terrible "lethargy", a genuine nightmare in fact, the Romanian sociey and its elites were again searching for models to be translated/transferred to Romania: the Swedish model, the Spanish model, the English model or, even beyond the geographical limits of Europe, the American model. The range seemed as varied and attractive as that of automobile makes. Shaping a cultural pattern is, however, more difficult than buying a new car. Condemned by its recent history to a prolonged period of immaturity the country was again in the position of children aping their elders.

Beside borrowing/importing/transferring foreign cultural or political models, translating proper acquired a new significance in the process of our country's westernization. For several years we translated the so-called *acquis communautaire*, a body of texts meant to render Romania's legal system compatible with the European Union legislation. Like the Romans before them, the Europeans are modelling the newly integrated territories on their cultural patterns. The past proved them to be particularly efficient in this field as Todorov's book discussed above clearly demonstrates. The danger of overtranslation (quantitatively speaking) is, however, painfully real. From language to fashion, immoderate and unfiltered intakes seem to annihilate any form of difference. We seem to be rebuilding the original tower of unity and harmony, but maybe the lost paradise was a pretty dull place in its uniformity. On the other hand, living more than a century later than Maiorescu we know better than him, from the experience of the fist half of the 20th century, that, despite his pessimism, forms can be ultimately filled with content. It is up to us to make the correct choices and to strike a delicate balance between translation as transfer and translation as negotiation, as harmonization of different entities.

It is this role of negotiator that the translator is mainly called upon to play nowadays. And this negotiation is by no means exclusively political or economic; it is a cultural and even a purely linguistic one as well[17]. The collapse of glamorous civilizations like those of the Aztecs or of the Incas was largely due, as shown above, to the failure of these people to negotiate an acceptable relation with the Spaniards. A cultural cataclysm of such magnitude was to a great extent caused by infelicitous communication. By allowing the Spaniards to take possession of their world, first linguistically and then militarily, politically and economically the Indians of the Americas condemned their civilization to extinction. Their interpreters, people like the famous Malinche and, undoubtedly, numberless others who have remained anonymous were turned by the cunning conquistadors into powerful (though probably

[17] Nida and Taber (1969) and Bassnett-McGuire (1980).

BDD-A9854 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:17 UTC)

innocent) instruments of destruction. And it is maybe with good reason that present-day Mexicans have a grudge against these unfortunate forerunners of theirs.

If the judicial foundation, the legal common denominator, of what the Europeans dream to be their politically united and spiritually harmonious federation is a body of texts, the importance of *phrasing* cannot be overestimated. The way we fit into this enormous puzzle will essentially depend on the words we choose to negotiate our position within the intricate European mechanism. Political and economic integration thus begins with linguistic harmonization. Words have regained an essential ontological status comparable to the original, mythic one.

The success of these negotiations largely depends then on the skills of the people entrusted with this delicate task. The pressure of acculturation is enormous and we should not make the mistake of underestimating it. The portmanteau word *franglais*, which Étiemble coined[18], was to become famous, a symbol of the linguistic and ultimately cultural hybridizations resulting from the overwhelming impact of English worldwide. Romanian itself was at the end of the century experiencing a similar onslaught. If such phenomena are by no means new, the scale of the process and the role technology and the media are playing in it are undoubtedly unprecedented. Alternative sources of information (and, to a certain extent education) such as television, the Internet or the press in general are competing with traditional schooling in shaping the minds of the younger generations. Like the virgin forests of America Columbus was extatically exploring more than 500 years ago they are taken possession of and moulded by cultural and linguistic patterns that they are unable either to resist or to comprehend or internalize. The Frenchified fops of our late 19th century came back from Paris with a varnish of western culture and vocabulary and were mocked at by Maiorescu or Eminescu. Their number and influence was limited. Their modern contemporaries are far more numerous and less educated. Sheer statistics makes them more dangerous. They are the mutant cells of a process that can turn malignant. Language and culture essentially shape our identity. A battle for preserving this identity by intelligently and succesfully negotiationg our interactions with other cultures can prove to be essential for our spiritual survival. Once again the role of the translator as a go-between, as a negotiator of cultural transfers or of linguistic equivalences becomes very important.

4. Conclusions

The world we live in is a world in which cultural exchanges and interactions are far more numerous and more extensive than at any moment in the past. Translating and interpreting have become intellectual endeavours whose importance cannot be overestimated (the bureaucracy of the expanding European Union needed to create a special department to facilitate communication in the institutional Babel of Brussels which already includes over a score of official languages). The people entrusted with this task do not only have to convey information by switching the linguistic codes. Their role can be fundamental in a process in which the cultural status of peer members of the Union in relation to one another is negotiated. The success of the Quixotic project of a united Europe largely depends on the

[18] In Étiemble (1964).

BDD-A9854 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:17 UTC)

skills of these people and their managing to strike a balance between two equally dangerous extremes: uniformization and loss of identity or a new no less catastrophic collapse of this modern variant of the mythical Babel tower.

Dan Mateescu
University of Bucharest
Department of English
dandelina63@yahoo.com; decemate@yahoo.fr

References

Bassnett-McGuire, S. 1980. *Translation Studies*. New York: Methuen.
Étiemble, R. 1964. *Parlez-vous franglais?*. Paris: Gallimard.
Garcilaso de la Vega, El Inca. 1974. *Regeştile cronici ale incaşilor*. Bucharest: Editura Univers.
Las Casas, B. de 1971. *History of the Indies*. New York: Harper and Row.
Maiorescu, T. 1978. *Opere,* vol. I. Bucharest: Editura Minerva.
Nida, E. A. and Taber, C. R. 1969. *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
Steiner, G. 1975. *After Babel*. New York and London: Oxford University Press.
Todorov, T. 1994. *Cucerirea Americii. Problema celuilalt*. Bucharest: Institutul European.

BDD-A9854 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:17 UTC)

BDD-A9854 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:17 UTC)

Tiparul s-a executat sub c-da nr. 2672/2010
la Tipografia Editurii Universității din București

BDD-A9854 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:17 UTC)

BDD-A9854 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:17 UTC)