changing worlds & signs of the times

Selected Proceedings
from the 10th International Conference
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

EDITORS
Eleftheria Deltsou
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Changing Worlds & Signs of the Times

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The Task of the Translator

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Abstract

In In 2005 Nicolas Bourriaud, attempting to encapsulate the prevailing cultural conditions, stated that there is a need for translation of cultural values of different groups within a double process of a trend toward the creolisation of cultures and a struggle for autonomy, to produce singularities in a more and more standardized world. This sets the scene for the unfolding of an inherent antinomy that renders constant tension a predominant feature of our times. Risk, fear, insecurity, pervade an unstable system whose legitimacy is gradually eroded. The resurgence of nationalist/racist and fundamentalist tendencies challenge notions of 'progress', while the multiplicity of populations, cultures, traditions, languages, undermine the shift toward "globalization" based on a uniform and unilingual 'standardized' model. In these complex and multifaceted conditions translation is a key factor in the processes of communication. This paper suggests that in its attempt to negotiate the labyrinth of meaning and communication, our fragmentary, unstable, open-ended and unpredictable culture may find it useful to revisit the notion of "abductive reasoning", as set out by Gregory Bateson via Peirce, a notion inherent in the task of the translator whose skills could greatly contribute in the current quest for meaningful exchange.

Keywords

translation , communication , globalization , postmodern , abduction , hyper-consumption

Not so long ago, in 2005, Nicolas Bourriaud attempting to encapsulate the prevailing contemporary cultural conditions spoke of the need for translation: "What matters today is to translate the cultural values of cultural groups and to connect them to the world network. This 'reloading process' of modernism according to the twenty-first-century issues could be called altermodernism, a movement connected to the creolisation of cultures and the fight for autonomy, but also the possibility of producing singularities in a more and more standardised world" (Bourriaud, 2009, p. 2).

This statement by Bourriaud sets the scene for the unfolding of an inherent antinomy that would tend to create constant tension as the predominant feature of our times. It speaks of a binary situation, which we all experience, with the multiplicity of populations, cultures, traditions, languages, identities drawn into current global development on the one hand and the uniform and unilingual 'standardised' model under the signs of the 'urban' and 'English' of contemporary digital culture on the other.

In such a context, the task of translation appears to be crucial. How are players in this multi-cultural mix to understand each other? But is the notion of an intermediary between, say, two different cultural settings who transfers the values of the one onto the register of the other sufficient? The notion is problematic from the outset: this is no easy task, and certainly not self-explanatory as perhaps implied in the first sentence of the excerpt from Bourriaud's statement.

First of all the notion of 'cultural value' itself is problematic, as value is not something given and clear-cut, in the same way as the concept of the cultural groups that carry those values. This would mean that these possess a "cultural identity", a concept which has been questioned by Stuart Hall who (in 1989) suggested that: "instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices they represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view," Stuart Hall concludes, "problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity', lays claim" (Hall, 1989, p.222).

The point made here may sound, today, commonplace. We have come across it many a time in postmodern academia. *Le sujet en procès*, was the term used by Julia Kristeva almost forty years ago (Kristeva, 1984 [1974], p.37), while, at about the same time (1979), Paul Ricoeur offered that the notion that the self needs to veer away from the certainty of Cartesian subjectivity, suggesting that subjectivity or the appropriation of the self lies not at the origin of the human venture, but it is an endless task of understanding accomplished "only after painful critiques of the self" (Ricoeur, 1986 [1979], p.237).

The need to revisit these long-standing views *a propos* of a keynote address by a current intellectual "star" would imply that such views have still no self-evident currency. And it is even more striking as in our post-postmodern globalisation of digital media where the notion of a given cultural identity or even of a self, developing through multiple

trajectories, 'surfing' on the internet and social media, become all the more fragmentary and 'tentative'. But there is a worrying sense that these issues remain within the walls of academia, "in here", discussed by the select few without any serious impact "out there".

This "out there" is an issue that in turn problematises the notion of "we" when contemporary experience is discussed. We, the few persons gathered here, can sense this notion when we look at a snapshot from a street, any street, in a city of those societies we can still, despite the financial crisis, term as 'affluent', although a more apt term would be – to follow Gilles Lipovetsky – "societies of hyper consumption" (Lipovetsky, 2004). But, be that as it may, the question is: Yes, I can see myself here, but what happens at the other edge of the spectrum? What communication can there be in the outer reaches of our so-called "global village"?

It is difficult to find oneself there, and one can get lost as in a dark forest. Like Dante in hell I need a guide, and here I look to the Brazilian documentary photographer Sebastiao Salgado. In his now famous documentation of the open gold mine in the Bald Mountain, the Serra Pelada, of Brazil in 1986 we are faced with a spectacle that is hard to accommodate within our worldview involving the freedom of the individual. The pictures depict hundreds or thousands of degraded human beings working in abject conditions in an immense open gold mine and have been published and exhibited around the world (and now widely circulating in the world wide web) (Salgado, 2006). They are disturbing, to say the least. At the same time they hold a strange fascination. They are also defiant, even if by the sheer fact that the people in them can endure such life, though it is not only that. What is intriguing with regard to our topic is the, very rare it would seem, photographs where people look at each other, such as the one that has captured the confrontation between the armed guard and the desperate/furious worker. I wonder: In that confrontation, what is communicated? And how can I become part of that communication?

In this setting what can be said of Ricoeur's take on subjectivity, which is to be accomplished, as we just recalled, only after painful critiques of the self? Who in that literal hellhole can do that?

It is not totally inconceivable I will concede, but highly unlikely. And even as one tries to come to terms with such a question in such an environment, it becomes immediately apparent that this is the case with situations much broader than the specific confrontation between the worker and the security guard in the madness of Serra Pelada.

Imagine 'ourselves' caught in a different dispute, which we may call industrial, or simply a failure of systems. Chaos in the railway station with thousands of commuters stranded. Or imagine ourselves on the mayhem of the first day of the Christmas sale at Harrods or some other famous department store, or queuing up for days for the launch of the latest electronic gadget.

In the instantaneous culture, the culture of impatience, speed and instant gratification there is no time, and of course no penchant, to critique oneself. The other day there

was this piece of really serious news: It was posted on yahoo, just last Monday [30 Sep. 2013], and it read: "Bad news, America. Fast-food drive-thrus are getting slower. On average, customers spent roughly three minutes (180 seconds) from order to pickup in 2013, the study found, or about eight seconds slower than last year" (Stableford, 2013).

There are reasons for this woeful slow down – and we could look at one of them if anybody cares later on. What can suffice for now is that the accelerated experience even if haphazard, is controlled; it is monitored and adjusted. And this willed acceleration affects us all in the societies of mass-consumption, where in a way analogous to Serra Pelada we have no time to think, and in a forever accelerating hyperactivity, important shifts take place.

As Gilles Lipovetsky puts it: in a multi-tasking universe speed replaces human contact, productivity replaces quality of life, excitement replaces pleasure [...] and as real relations of intimacy give way to potential or virtual exchange, a culture of performative hyperactivity is formed without specific character or sensibility (Lipovetsky, 2004, p.41).

This is the time that Zygmunt Bauman describes as *liquid* modernity. "Liquids," he says, "travel fast. The extraordinary mobility of fluids is what associates them with the idea of 'lightness' [and in turn] "we associate 'lightness' or 'weightlessness' with mobility and inconstancy: we know from practice that the lighter we travel the easier and faster we move. These are reasons to consider 'fluidity' or 'liquidity' as fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the nature of the present, in many ways *novel*, phase in the history of modernity" (Bauman, 2006, p.3). Modernity, to be sure, had been engaged in 'melting solids' right from the outset as we are told in the Communist Manifesto, but in its first phase it was replacing the melted solids with new ones, it was a solid modernity, whereas in its later stage it only left a state of flux, and hence it may be termed "liquid modernity."

In the fourteen years that have elapsed since the writing of Bauman's book a lot has happened. When Bauman coined the term *liquid modernity* 'we' were just coming to experience the shift – mainly in two areas: Geopolitics – through the new-type wars of the 1990s [Iraq and Yugoslavia], and Information Technology – through the personal computer [internet - mobile]. What happened in the first decade of the 21st century we all know:

The world has become unhinged after two Septembers, 2001 and 2008, the one bringing down the Twin Towers and the other Lehman Brothers. We still live in the poisonous aftermath of both. But at the same time technology has not stopped; it has advanced to the point that the term digital may be used to described our world as whole, as in Alan Kirby's 'definition' of our current experience as *digimodernism*, which, in his own words, "identifies as the critical event in contemporary culture the profound and shattering encounter between computerisation and the text. Its most recognisable form is a new kind of digitised textuality – onward, haphazard and evanescent" (Kirby, 2010).

But what is interesting is that these three adjectives [one of which he have already come across], if they mean something, have been making us work and move faster and

faster while all institutions and covenants we have lived by vanish before our eyes – to the point that we shift from the liquid to the ultimate "thin air" invoked by that world-famous phrase in the text of 1848 already referred to, from the liquid indeed to the evanescent. And if in modernity's early solid stage 'traditional' society was dismantled, its later liquid stage brings about a total obliteration or forgetfulness of 'solid' modern life.

So what does transpire is that even in these times of crisis we are made to consume technology's gadgets, with greater excitement, newer and newer, forgetting what was there before, to the point that a two-year old device is considered 'prehistoric', even as we are propelled to enhance our performativity and our productivity in order to consume more.

All these of course bear on communication. As would be expected performativity and productivity in a context of ever accelerating activity calls for similarly performative, instrumental language. In any event in this culture of speed and of the instantaneous we have no time to waste in useless wanderings in the grey areas of critical thinking.

But we all know that language is not merely instrumental. In as much as we are human we cannot but communicate through a surplus of signification. This is how we interpret the patterns on what seems the earliest artefacts made purposefully by individuals of our species, the nassarius shell beads and the carved ochre stones in the Blombos caves of the middle stone age.

An elegant description of that shift from mere performativity to signification through the creative impulse is provided by James Lull: "Creativity emerges from the human spirit to transfigure a person's thoughts and feelings into meaningful symbolic representations that are expressed to others through various modes of social interaction. The decorative use jewellery in the southern coastal regions of Africa some 75,000 years ago – the famous nassarius shell beads of South Africa's Blombos Caves – represents the first documented attempt by humans to employ symbolic resources external to the person for purposes of expressive enhancement, not simply for instrumental purposes" (Lull, 2007, pp.31-2).

A similar process is at work in linguistic communication, and to come closer to the present we read in a famous essay by Walter Benjamin:

"In all language and linguistic creations there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated; depending on the context in which it appears, it is something that symbolizes or something symbolized." (Benjamin, 1973 [1936], p.79].

This added something is where meaning resides, concealed and fragmentary, and always elusive. Words have more than one meaning, and can be described by other words. They are polysemic, as all utterances are as well. It is the nature of human speech, the nature of the linguistic act that it cannot settle its accounts once and for all. It is a fact that, as Ricoeur points out, everything can be said "in other words". In other words there is no single statement that can express an absolute truth. In truth everything may be considered as a figure of speech, and the "rule of metaphor" governs language as a whole.

It is here that we come up against the question which served as our point of depar-

ture. How can one translate another language, another identity, another culture? How can one talk of one world using the tongue of another?

Benjamin states it thus: The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. [...] He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. Our translations even our best ones proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German, instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English" (Benjamin, 1973 [1936], p.79).

Ricoeur encapsulates this goal by reference to two examples, which he sees as the ultimately successful translations: the early nineteenth century translations of Sophocles by Hoelderlin, and the fairly recent translation of the Old Testament into French by Meschonnic. The way he phrases it is really enlightening: Holederlin, he says, speaks Greek in German ("parle grec en allemand"); Meschonnic speaks Hebrew in French ("parle hébreu en français") (Ricoeur, 2004, p.69).

If we were indeed to set to work on such a project, we will find that this is where a different process is at work, a process which, simply put, we could call *synthetic* rather than *analytic*, *convergent* rather than *divergent*, [that cannot be properly accommodated by instrumental rationality], a process which may be seen but not properly recognised.

It is process that involves *inferring* meaning rather than *deducing* it. This process is often ascribed to visual as opposed to verbal communication. Such a difference may exist in the interpretive logic patterns of the two types of communication, but it could be said that inference is present in metaphor and by extension to all language, and it becomes more evident in the labour of translation, were more often than not the translator has to rely more educated guessing rather than clear rules of equivalence, using the proves of abduction which Peirce referred to as hypothesis building. As suggested in a clear and elegant exposition by Stathis Psillos, Peirce claimed that

> "Abduction consists in studying facts and devising a theory to explain them" (5.145), it is the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis" (5.171). Abduction is the only kind of reasoning by means of which new ideas can be introduced (cf. 5.171) (Psillos, 2010, p.117).

In fact, Psillos adds, Peirce thought that abduction is the mode of reasoning by means of which new ideas have actually been introduced: "All the ideas of science come to it by the way of Abduction" (5.145). "Abduction", he added, "consists in studying facts and devising a theory to explain them. Its only justification is that if we are ever to understand things at all, it must be in that way (5.145). Peirce, our author continues, never doubted the reality, importance, pervasiveness and reasonableness of explanatory reasoning. And yet he thought that explanatory reasoning had been understudied—its character as a distinct logical operation had not been understood. Nor had it been sufficiently distinguished from other basic forms of reasoning (Psillos, 2010, p.117).

This is perhaps what is at the core of way if thinking that could engender an alternative, such as Gregory Bateson's suggestions with regard to metaphorical inference and abduction, as summarised by his daughter and editor of his last unfinished book "Where Angels Fear":

> The theme of metaphor runs right through Gregory's work. Indeed, the idea that was engrossing him in his last weeks was the idea of syllogisms of metaphor. The use of syllogisms of metaphor, which he called abduction, was for him a basic intellectual strategy, the search for insight through analogy, as when he analyzed the process of evolution as analogous to the process of thought (Bateson & Bateson, 1989, p.192).

To be sure, these ideas were never fully baked. Neither Bateson's proposals were properly developed nor Peirce's insights systematically explored. So, as with Stuart Hall's ideas (that we touched upon in the beginning of this text), these views do not seem to carry much weight in the current setting. Bateson is all but forgotten, while the overall idea of abduction may be admitted in a limited field such as the area of art and design and the education thereof, albeit as a concession even there – for assessment in a programme of study has to follow rigorous and clear-cut logical rules. It is interesting that every now and then one hears voices calling to introduce elements of art and design education in business management studies, for obvious reasons – not least in the wake of Steve Jobs' success and his advice to Bill Gates to 'loosen up' (Isaacson, 2011, p.172). But such calls never gain any ground beyond the news coverage classified as quaint by the media. Indeed rather the opposite seems to be the case, as even art and design education is colonized by the business logic and ethic.

Perhaps here we need a different mindset. For if we are to come back to our original quest for communication in this multi-cultural world, we need a process whereby each side, by analogy to translation, would be infused with the genius of the other. This complex and not clearly determinable process requires an alternative approach, an approach that is forever open to reinterpretation, tentative and tolerant, as cultures and languages evolve, and cannot but make use of metaphor, inference and abduction.

In a way it surprising that this is not happening, as instead of 'opening' language toward that richer polyvalent meaning we tend to 'close' it within the poorer confines of a univocal message – especially trough the proliferation of processes of regulation and administration which, in this all the ore 'administered society of ours, call for rigorous, legally binding terms.

In such conditions what is not surprising is that one of the salient features of our times is, as the historian Tony Judt has pointed out, the widespread feeling that we cannot come up with alternatives (Judt, 2010, p.2).

This may be understood if we look a little closer at Bauman's position, who sees what he calls the liquefying process of our current world as a further twist in moderni-

ty's sweeping away of 'traditional' institutions, in the inexorable advance of instrumental rationality that has been melting down all that is solid and profaning all that is sacred. At first early modernity did away with the existing institutions, such as

> the hereditary estates [...] authoritarian power, patterns of dependency and interaction were all thrown into the melting pot, to be subsequently recast and refashioned; this was the phase of triumphant, boundary-breaking, all-eroding modernity (Bauman, 2006, p.6).

It was the period when freedom against tyranny, or negative freedom, was won. Now, in the second stage, when one would expect the struggle for positive freedom to commence one finds that

> the levers needed to transform 'negative' into 'positive freedom' [i.e. freedom to set the range of choices and the agenda of choice-making] have broken and fallen apart. Public power has lost much of its old awesome and resented oppressive potency - but it has also lost a good part of its enabling capacity (Bauman, 2006, p.51).

And this is so because

> today patterns and institutions in society are no longer 'given', let alone 'self-evident'; [...] they have changed their nature and have been reclassified as items in the inventory of individual tasks. The liquidizing powers have moved from the 'system' to 'society', from 'politics' of collective groups to individual 'life-policies' - or have descended from the 'macro' to the 'micro' level of social cohabitation. Ours is, as a result, an individualized, privatized version of modernity" (Bauman 2006, p.7).

This is then, perhaps, why it is so difficult to think of alternatives nowadays. The struggle for positive freedom is hard enough; it is even difficult to envision it. Such a dispersal of private micro-worlds, as the one described by Bauman, make it even harder, as any proposal for an alternative cannot summon a 'given' or 'self evident' collective subject. In a world of so many different communities, identities, the appeal to a collective subject is nigh impossible. So, rather than think of something new, it is much safer to revert uncritically to the old ways, to what one already knows, which may be seen as the only stable point in a world out of joint. Conflict is the hallmark of our times. There is a pervading sense that 'common ground' is shrinking. Dialogue seems to be in danger of breaking down, even in places such as the US Congress.

In such conditions, the task of the translator, that would seek to enable one to speak in one's own tongue the language of the other, that would enable, say, to speak Hebrew in Arabic and vice versa, may contribute to providing the common ground needed for communication in this world of turmoil, and may help us think of some alternative to the one-way street we are plodding along.

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