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Hybridity and translation

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When two different things are brought together – when plants or animals are ‘crossed’, when two identities are fused, when literary genres are mixed, when a building combines the features of different architectural styles – something new results. This new thing is a hybrid. Today the idea of hybridity has largely positive connotations as it is articulated in esthetics or in cultural theory using postcolonial models (Bhabha, Young) and cyborg theory (Haraway). Mixed identities and creative interference are positively valued for their power to innovate and surprise, to express new emotions and ideas, to reflect changing sociocultural realities. In French, a similar reevaluation of the term “*métissage*” has been undertaken. However, the idea of hybridity carries with it a long history of negativity. Consider the words *mongrel* or *half-breed*, which share the same semantic field. During the 18th and 19th centuries hybridity was regularly associated with the abnormal, the monstrous or the grotesque, and the term was implicated in some of the more somber episodes of scientific history having to do racist ideas of ‘polygenesis’ – which postulated the existence of more than one human species. For those who defended pure forms of expression, hybridity was a form of contamination – in the same way as religious syncretism was and continues to be rejected by defenders of authoritative dogma.

The hybridity that concerns Translation Studies* belongs to a tradition of debate having to do with plurilingualism and linguistic creolization, notions of transculturalism and transtextualization, as well as aspects of diasporic cultural expression that include bilingualism and double consciousness. While these ideas of cultural mixing have become especially prominent since the advent of postcolonial theory (see Post-colonial literatures and translation*) in the last decades of the 20th century, it is mistaken to assume that hybridity is a new feature of cultural life. Only ignorance of history could lead to the assumption that migration and diasporic consciousness are new features of human history. In fact, significant migratory movements across all of the continents have existed from earliest history, movements inspired by imperial conquest and settlement, or trade routes along passages like the Silk Road, resulting in phenomena of contact, translation, cultural mixing and hybridity (Tymoczko).

There are strong affinities between the process of translation and the creation of a cultural or linguistic hybrid. A translation carries aspects of one text into the materiality of another, so any translated text could be considered a hybrid that results from the interpenetration of two language systems. This is a highly abstract notion,

however, because a translated text does not necessarily carry the marks of the process through which it came into being. It often (but not always) looks like a product of the target language.

Hybridity should therefore be reserved to describe only certain kinds of translations – those that draw attention to themselves as the products of two separate meaning systems. Hybrid texts are those that display “translation effects”: dissonances, interferences, disparate vocabulary, a lack of cohesion, unconventional syntax, a certain “weakness” or “deterritorialization”. This mixing can be expressed either at the level of linguistic codes or more broadly at the level of cultural or historical references. While the hybrid text affirms the dividedness of identity, often becoming an expression of loss and disorientation, it can also become a powerful and emancipatory place for the writer to occupy.

Translation offers a model of hybrid textuality when it bears the marks of the *relation* that brought it into existence. This highlighting of relationality supports Walter Benjamin’s idea that translation does not erase language difference but exposes the spaces where meaning-systems collide. The translated text can be understood as a contact zone, a third space, which is an overlapping of cultures that can generate “borderline affects and identifications” (Bhabha 1993: 167). For Homi Bhabha, following Walter Benjamin, the third space or space-between must be understood not as a separate alternative space but as an arena of active and ongoing differences, whose meanings are always in flux. The hybrid text can be understood, then, as a translation that is – according to the norms of conventional language transfer – deliberately unfinished.

Certain practices highlight the power of translation to produce a disjunctive, relational entity. These range from the self-translations of postcolonial writers (Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh) to the esthetics of translators such as Henri Meschonnic or the Quebec poet Jacques Brault (*Transfigurations*, 1999), or indeed of any translator who deliberately carries a literalist approach to its most extreme point, with the aim of infecting the structures of the target language with the syntax and vocabulary of the original. The experimental writer Christine Brooke-Rose creates a linguistically hybrid novel in *Between* (1978) by replicating the structures of the plurilingual universe of the conference interpreter. Alexis Nouss proposes a specific configuration of hybridity with the notion of the “*outré-langue*”, (‘the language beyond’) – a notion evoking the historical resonances of language which haunt the author’s tongue, especially when the author writes from a situation of exile or loss. Certain writers in the modernist tradition have attempted to convey the layered experiences of history and diasporic wandering in their writing through incomplete translation and hybrid texts. This was true of Ezra Pound as it is true of the Montreal poet A.M. Klein who integrated the many languages and traditions of the Jewish past into his own distinctive pluralist poetics.

Hybridity takes on special importance in contexts where there is a heightened and historically anchored consciousness of cultural and linguistic mixing. Indeed, both translation and hybridity have become key terms in accounting for the ways in which divided, recovered or reconstructed identities are configured within the wider cultural forums in which they wish to participate. In this sense, both translation and hybridity are alternatives to ideas of assimilation (loss of identity) and multiculturalism (the multiplication of discreet and separate identities). Both translation and hybridity emphasize the disjunctive and provisional nature of affiliation, taking the form of interlingual or mixed expression. These forms of incomplete translation occur, for instance, in writing communities like those of postcolonial Africa or India, where there is a constant and ongoing interrelationship between the colonial language (English or French) and the languages of daily life, or in diasporic or immigrant communities, or in communities where a minoritized vernacular competes with standard languages. Amitav Ghosh's *The Sea of Poppies*, is powerfully illustrative of the ways in which the English language novel can integrate a plurality of modes of expression, conveying, in this case, a real sense of the multilingual and hybrid identities of colonial Calcutta. Edwin Gentzler's exploration of translation in the Americas (*Translation and Identity in the Americas*) highlights the prominence of hybridity and métissage in the historical consciousness of such nations as Brazil and reveals the plurilingual and mixed origins of United States culture. Hybridity has been discussed as a strong feature of writing that emerges at the borders between nations and languages, such as Chicano and Chicana literature, with its mixtures of English and Spanish. When such mixed languages become the basis of a literary culture, the resulting texts are self-consciously hybrid. Other North American examples of such languages are *chiac* from the Canadian region of Acadie and *joual* in Quebec – both French heavily influenced by English. Theatre is particularly rich in these kinds of plurilingual experiments.

If a hybrid text is in some sense already a translation, a product of the encounter between two languages, how is this plurilingual, hybrid text itself to be translated? How can translation recreate the tensions that are part of the original? There are no easy answers to these questions, as several important analyses have shown. In each case, attention has to be given to the social force of the languages and the cultural and literary implications of their intermixing. Catherine Leclerc has reflected on this question in her study of translations from the Acadian *chiac*, showing how translation displaces and intensifies the tensions of the original. The translator must create crossovers in the new languages, consciously taking on the role of a rewriter. Canadian translators Philip Stratford, Betty Bednarski, Kathy Mezei and Ray Ellenwood have all reflected on the difficulties – ethical and esthetic – of translating *joual* (see Simon 1995), often admitting to the impossibilities of transferring the transgressive power of this particular language mix from French into English. How to transfer the minor status of Spanish within Chicana literature to the Catalan situation where Spanish is

a dominant language? This is the challenge that Pilar Godayol faced in her translations of Chicana writings, attempting to restore the force of the original through italics, for instance. In these cases, the conventional meaning of equivalence must be re-examined to allow for the reproduction not of semantic meaning but of the historical and political forces represented in language.

The term hybridity has been the object of three main kinds of critique in the area of cultural theory. First, because it is a product of bounded cultural forms (languages, cultures, identities), the hybrid presupposes and indeed requires the existence of pure, uncontaminated artifacts. There is therefore a kind of complicity or collusion between the hybrid (as the negation of pure forms) and the normative forms that allow it to come into existence. The popularity of the hybrid possibly even exaggerates the normative and conventional aspects of objects deemed to lie outside the hybrid. In fact, all cultures are interwoven, and there are aspects of hybridization in the cultural life of practically any identity or object that is put into circulation. Second, hybridity too easily effaces the conditions and power relations that bring it into being. All hybrids are not equal: some are the product of forced yoking, while others are the product of voluntary affiliations. The mixing of cultures has often been the result of war and conquest, such as the violent colonization and evangelization of Latin America. Hybridization occurs in such zones of contact, marked by unequal relations of power. It is essential, then, that a defense of the hybrid does not ignore the political forces that continue to marginalize and exclude certain populations. Nor should such a defense avoid distinguishing between the hybridity of privileged middle-class cosmopolitanism and the unwanted marginality often imposed on less privileged groups. Celebrated as the mark of new, fluid identities, hybridity has more often been used as a mark of value than as an instrument of analysis. To what extent can terms like *hybridity*, *metis-sage*, *cosmopolitanism* or *creolization* account for specific transcultural encounters, the historical significance and differential cultural weightings of mixed forms? The important volume *Metissages* by François Laplantine and Alexis Nouss is a symptom of this difficulty. If all the objects in the encyclopedia are “métis” (the volume contains hundreds of entries, across historical periods, artistic genres and cultures), what is the specificity of the cultural configurations that produced them? What the concept of *metisage* gains in philosophical depth it loses in analytical precision. And finally, how long does a hybrid remain hybrid? When does a creole become a normativized language (like Haitian creole or Yiddish)? Hybridity is necessarily a ‘timely’ and temporary creation, one that creates a rupture in the fabric of time. Once it enters into the expected repertory of cultural artifacts and systems, it loses its right to the title.

The notion of hybridity remains useful for Translation Studies, however, when it points to practices of translation that highlight the disjunctures between the cultures they are bridging, practices that create texts of interference and contamination. These practices of translation necessarily call upon an enlarged idea of translation*

(Tymoczko), one that includes practices of self-translation, of bilingual writing, of unfinished translation. These and other expressions of language encounter reflect the dissonances of the contact zones from which they emerge.

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