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FOR A CRITIQUE OF INTERCULTURAL RELATIONS

Premise; 1. Translation in today’s capitalist global communication world (by Augusto Ponzio); 2. Communication as translation for others, reconstruction with others, and restitution to others (by Susan Petrilli)

Premise

What goes under the name of globalization is no more than what we propose to call communication-production, a new phase in social reproduction controlling communication today. Communication is production: no doubt what remains is the old production system, its characteristic modality of exploitation through paid labour, the realization of increasing profits by a minority that is ever more reduced, profit at all costs, even at the cost of destroying the ecological environment, of producing underdevelopment beyond the margins of survival, of resorting to war as a solution to international conflict.

This means that the centre (which is ever more degraded and dehumanized) continues to dominate over peripheries, such that transformation in a globalising world is no more that the adaptation of dominion in terms of a “glocalising world”. This phase in social reproduction is widely recognized as post-, with its pas-partout term “cultural interaction” which also applies to translation. It presents itself as globalization, interculturalism, hybridization, contamination, post-capitalism, post-colonialism, post-apartheid, and is what we are proposing to call communication-production.

Communication in this situation is not only the intermediary phase between production and consumption in the reproduction process. Not only is exchange, that is, the circulation of merchandise, communication, but production and consumption are also communication. In other words, not only does the exchange phase call for communication, but so does the production phase – more precisely, production depends on communication that is ever more extended and global permitting exploitation of low cost labour at a world level. In addition to this, communication today avails itself of communication channels that can easily cross through space and time, such as oilpipes and electronic devices.

In spite of multinationals, the amplification of communication scenarios, encounter among different cultures, foreignisation, we are faced by the same misery: the realization of profit by a few at the expense of the many, which in “globalization” are on the increase: exploitation is spreading at a world level because global communication-production is imposing itself at a world level as the only form of production possible.

To make such a claim means in itself to work in terms of translation. The translator, the interpreter, the interculturalist today cannot prescind from the situation of global communication-production as we are describing it, if the intention is to impede (in different
forms, with different means and effects) that translation emanating from the little centre of communication control, with its so-called “development areas” – the target in interlingual and intercultural translation –, should do violence to the big, proletarianized, exploited periphery with its so-called “underdevelopment areas” – the peripheral source in interlingual and intercultural translation.

Our paper is divided into two parts Translation in Today’s Capitalist Global Communication World, by Augusto Ponzio; Communication as Translation for Others, Reconstruction with Others, and Restitution to Others, by Susan Petrilli.

1. Translation in Today’s Capitalist Global Communication World
(by Augusto Ponzio)

Production today is characterised by the industrial revolution of automation, globalisation of communication and universalisation of the market. Universalisation is not only a quantitative fact of expansion, but above all qualitative transformation represented by the fact that anything can be translated into merchandise. Communication today is no longer just an intermediate phase in the reproductive cycle (production, exchange, consumption). Far more radically, communication now represents the constitutive modality of production and consumption processes themselves. Not only does the exchange phase involve communication, but production and consumption as well converge with communication. So the whole reproductive cycle is communication. This phase in capitalist reproduction can be characterised as the ‘communication-production’ phase.

The question of translation and cultural interaction in the so-called post-querelle, does not prescind from this character of communication – especially the productive character of speaking understood as work, trade and consumption (see Rossi-Landi, Language as Work and Trade, 1968), which itself belongs to the global communication-production cycle.

We are not particularly interested in a specifically sociological analysis or in an analysis from the perspective of translatology. It is not a matter of professional choice, but specifically concerns the connection between sign and ideology.

Sign systems are the material of social reproduction just as human behavior is sign behavior, therefore signifying behavior, insofar as human behavior is social. This is to say that behavior is programmed behavior, whether conscious or unconscious, and develops according to social programs. What is a program? A program regulates behavior that is established socially. The individual may or may not be aware that behavior is organized socially, but in any case as a social being the individual behaves according to programs. At this point, a distinction may be drawn between the terms ‘program’ properly understood, ‘project,’ and ‘plan’: a program is part of project, and a project is part of a plan. A plan is what we normally call ideology. With the Italian philosopher and semiotician Ferruccio Rossi-Landi we may define ideology as a social plan with given social interests, models, goals, and perspectives. A given ideology is always connected with the interests of a given social group. That our behavior is programmed behavior means that it is part of the larger picture, as in a series of concentric circles. Consequently, spontaneous or natural behavior does not exist in the human world, if not as a mystification. Human behavior is programmed behavior. And the idea that ideology has come to an end is only an ideological illusion, itself ideology connected with the spread of a given ideology that has become dominant. The social sign systems that regulate individual behavior are pseudo-totalities which function as pieces in larger totalities. Consequently, all social programs are controlled by a higher social level. The social interests of given groups, that are more or less extended, are
connected with verbal and nonverbal communication programs, which are part given social projects, which in turn are part of given social plans.

This approach puts us in a position to deal with the problem of the conditions of power, that is, the conditions that make control over human behavior possible in politically defined situations. This is the problem of ideology as social planning (see Rossi-Landi 1990, 1994). The processes of the production and circulation of signs are also the processes of the production and circulation of ideologies. As we progress from the smaller programs of pseudo-totalities to larger programs, projects, and plans to which pseudo-totalities belong, we obtain a general overview of the control mechanisms that behavioral programs exert upon each other concentrically. The processes involved are mostly retroactive and not at all unidirectional (that is, not mechanical processes of cause and effect, but dialectical processes, or in the terminology of engineering, feedback processes). And what is important to underline from our own point of view is that this whole system coincides with the general communication system. Whoever best controls this system, or at least consistent parts of it, is in the most favorable position to reach a situation of hegemony and power.

In the era of globalization of market and capital, dominant ideology converges with the logic itself of social reality, to the point that we can speak of the ‘ideo-logic’ rather than the logic – to which it corresponds – of social reality.

In all societies power has always been reached, organized and reproduced by controlling the communication network. However, the extent to which this is true has only become clear to us today, and indeed is today ever more the case. Hegemony in the communication-production phase is not the result of possessing things, but is connected with controlling communication relations, exchange relations at the level of market and production. The ruling class is specified as such in terms of control over communication.

Today grand ideologic narrative discourses are in crisis. They have been replaced by ideology, that is, the ideo-logic of the communication-production system. We can only understand the role of interlingual and intercultural translation today in light of the connection between signs and the ideo-logic of the social reproduction system. The whole system of social reproduction is made possible by communication and, therefore, by signs, verbal and nonverbal signs. Intersemiotic, interlingual and endolingual translations are a constituent part of the social structures and processes. Such an approach to the question of translation and to the role of the translator goes beyond generic terms including, for example, cultural interaction, hybridity, domestication, contamination of the different post-conceptions, evidencing the effective connection between communication, ideology and the presentday production system. To examine the ideologic value of translation across different linguistic and cultural worlds in order to contribute to global communication functional to the market and the reproduction cycle of production, means to consider communication not only in relation to the systems of sign exchange, but also to the systems of sign production and consumption.

Translation belongs to global communication and, consequently, it feels the effects of its characteristics and functions. Global communication is global not only in the sense that it has expanded over the whole planet but also in the sense that it adheres to the world, relates to the world as it is, and contributes to reproduce this world as it is. Communication-production is communication of this world. Communication and reality, communication and being, coincide. Realism in politics also implies the extrema ratio of war, as dictated by the strict law of the force of things. Realistic politics as such is the only kind of politics appropriate to global communication, to present-day communication-production. And this aspect of political-ideological communication is reflected in the function of translation in “cultural interaction”.

An important factor in cultural interaction is the relation between the language and culture of the
target centre, on the one hand, and the language and culture of the peripheral source, on the
other.

Persistence of communication-production, in spite of all posts-, is persistence of the same
social system over the planet with its continual adjustments and metamorphoses functional to its
own perseverance (think of so-called post-apartheid in this country); and translation is a decisive
instrument for this target. World planning is based on the productive character of
communication, and on identification of communication with being in social reproduction today.
But this project is also based on the fact that control over social reproduction can only be
achieved by controlling communication. A critical reflection on the processes of translation
among languages, cultures, and values, must consider this fundamental aspect of translative
processes and explicate it in its different aspects, tasks, and targets. In this sense, reflection on
translation and its functions in cultural communication implies a critical view of the
reproduction of communication-production.

To preserve the present-day system of communication-production is destructive.
Communication-production is communication for communication, production for production, to
the detriment of invention, innovation, re-planning, and to the detriment of the recognition of the
rights of others, of differences. Reproduction of communication-production endangers the
existence of man, not only his existence as an intelligent being, the preservation and expansion
of his intellectual faculties, his inventive capacity, but it also endangers his existence as a living
being, his health and survival. The preservation, reinforcement and expansion of today’s social
system, that is, communication-production, at all costs, is a lethal threat to life over the whole
planet: think of the ozone hole, ecological disasters caused by normal reproduction cycles, as
well as exceptional disasters. ‘Normal’ disasters include disasters connected with the
communication-production of war, to which the translation device contributes by translating the
language of war and its argumentations, its rhetoric and justifications.

2. Communication as Translation for Others, Reconstruction
with Others, and Restitution to Others (by Susan Petrilli)

As has often occurred in the course of history, present-day institutions coexist as integral parts
of social life, which in fact derive from earlier economic, social and cultural systems with their
stereotypes and ideologies. This is also true of such concepts as identity and difference together
with the rules and regulations that accompany them. Translation (theory and practice) is implied
in the question of identity and difference. And the risk translation runs these days is that of
contributing to homogenizing identities and differences, linguistic and cultural identities and
differences, of contributing to their negation and favouring the few with survival of not many
more. But what does identity and difference mean? How do they relate to signs?

―Signs make difference‖ (state). ―Difference makes signs‖ (process). These two statements
tell of a relation between “signs” and “difference”. However the relation is neither of symmetry
nor of reciprocity, as may seem at first sight.

In the first statement the term “difference” only indicates a state, instead, in the second case
it also indicates a process.

In the conception of Charles S. Peirce the sign stat pro aliquo and is understood in terms of
interpretation. His approach shows how the sign is made of difference. Difference here has at
least two meanings.

‘Difference’ may be understood in the sense of differing from other signs. ‘Difference’ may
also be understood in the sense of deferral. The sign is made of difference also in the sense of
differing understood as deferral. The sign refers to or defers to another sign which acts as its
interpretant. In this case, the sign is not merely a static fact of pre-established relationships, but a process of deferral, an infinite process of deferrals, says Peirce, from one interpretant to another.

Before Jacques Derrida replaced the ‘e’ with an ‘a’ in the French word différance to indicate the process of deferral, Peirce had already conveyed the dynamical sense of difference, that is, of deferral among signs with his idea of infinite semiosis. Deferral among sign and interpretant is understood in the dialogical terms of question and answer: the interpretant responds to the sign, is an answer to it, an answer to the sign that presents itself as a question, which as such sets clear limits to interpretation, according to a dialogical relation that is open and at once tied to or restrained by the irreducible otherness of its terms.

That the two statements “signs make difference” (state) and “difference makes signs” (process) are not symmetrical, nor imply each other reciprocally, given that in the first case ‘difference’ indicates a state and in the second a process, is also evidenced by the fact in the first case ‘difference’ may be replaced with ‘identity’, while this is not true in the second case.

“Sign makes difference” may be equalled to “signs makes identity”. In fact, the static sense of difference implies the interpretation of difference as “identity”.

On the contrary, “difference makes signs” does not mean “identity makes signs”. This is a statement that not only Peirce would not accept, but not even Saussure, nor could it find a place in any semiotic conception worthy of that name.

The sign resists identity, is refractory to difference understood as a state, and instead flourishes in deferral, in infinite deferral. Yet, according to the first statement, “signs make difference”, understood as “signs make identity”, signs most ironically seem to make difference as a state, as identity.

Therefore, we can speak of an abnormal, an aberrant use of signs, in the sense that they are used to ‘make’ difference understood as identity.

However, the sign is vowed to difference, understood as shift, deferral, dialogical opening, otherness. Difference that makes signs is otherness; difference thus understood distinguishes the sign from the static nature, univocality, and monologism of the signal, opening the sign to infinite semiosis. Signs that make difference are signs reduced to the status of signals, that lose their capacity for deferral. Such use of signs is reductive given that they are used as signals. Signs used to make difference are used abusively, aberrantly with respect to semiosis in general. In fact, such use blocks deferral, relating signs to static difference, difference understood as identity, and not to difference understood as an open process, as dialogical movement, as otherness.

Difference as identity is indifferent difference, the type of difference attached to functions and roles required by a closed universe of discourse, difference that only foresees alternatives and excludes difference as otherness.

Difference as otherness is unindifferent difference, difference as involvement and participation with other differences. Difference as otherness is not difference as being otherwise, which is characteristic of alternatives, but rather it is difference understood as deferral beyond the identity of being, whether individual or collective.

All cultures may use signs to establish differences with respect to other cultures, to establish identities, to determine a culture’s identity and juxtapose it to others. On the other hand, all cultures may employ these differences to defer their signs as well as the signs of others. In this case cultures recognize the capacity for interrogative intonation (Bakhtin) in their signs. Insofar as they are signs such signs interrogate other interpretants, in turn signs, in turn a question in a dialogue. The dialogic dialectics of this type of interaction represents the only possibility of escape from relativism as well as from dogmatism, both expressions of the failure to recognize and the tendency to overpower the other.
Translation is a modelling device which depends on the culture it belongs to, with its conception of identity and difference. But reflection on the question of translation may be oriented in the sense of a critical perspective on the conception of difference and its relation to signs. Consequently, the double sense of the relation between signs and difference may be specified in the conception of translation in one sense or in the other, that is, according to dominant ideology but also according to the capacity for critiquing dominant ideology.

Today’s sign universe as characterized by global communication tends to homogenize, level and eliminate differences. The result is a sense of frustration for identities and differences. These become even more obstinate in the will to assert themselves and prevail over other identities and other differences, in the will to affirm their separation, their identity-difference which is denied. Consequently reciprocal indifference among differences is transformed into hostility and conflict towards that which is different, the stranger.

In what signs can differences be traced?, considering that signs have now entered the circuits of global communication and circulate on the world market (which is connected to global communication), whose vocation is to cancel differences.

Differences can only be traced in the past; the present cancels them. That which may unite and differentiate and therefore identify is a common past: religion, language, territorial distribution, origin, descendency, roots, blood, colour of the skin, etc.

Identity looks for the possibility of asserting itself in that which may constitute difference, whether in the name of some historical residue or “natural” characteristic: tradition, habit, monuments, witnesses to a cultural past, language and dialect, religion, ethnic group.

It is significant that churches, museums, ruins, the historical parts of a city are the only characterizing elements, elements of identification of urban space which otherwise is anonymous and indistinct with respect to other urban spaces in today’s global communication world.

Signs of identity are trapped between indifference and mummified difference.

On the basis of identities fixed in this way, what has now become permeable in terms of national territory, urban space, suburbs, neighbourhoods, work-place and everyday life, can now be kept at a distance to varying degrees of abjection – ranging from hatred to so-called tolerance. The link to identity is given by religious, ethnic, linguistic differences, cultural past, and so forth.

The signs of the closed community, of community identity, signs of the “small experience” may be counteracted by signs of the “great experience” (Bakhtin) which flourish in dialogical deferral. Thanks to the processes of deferral these signs are part of the open community, participating in terms of fundamental “interconnection with the other” (Levinas), therefore involvement and irrevocable responsibility for others, unindifferent difference.

That which unites each and every one of us to every other is otherness, which cannot be reduced to identity, whether of the individual or of the collectivity, which cannot be reduced to difference connected to a genre of any sort. This condition of not belonging, of reciprocal strangeness is what unites us all in the relation of unindifference towards each other. No difference based on closed identity with its identity interests can cancel the essential condition of reciprocal otherness, reciprocal otherness, as much as identity and identity interests may be indifferent to the difference of single individuals, as much as to other identity differences, to the very point of overpowering them.

Global communication is making the signs of difference obsolete, it is rendering the aberrant use of signs to make difference ever more anachronistic and delusory. Today’s system of social reproduction is the latest form in which signs make difference. But this system itself is making it impossible to use signs in this sense.
Translation, translation theory as much as translation practice, may be conceived as translation for others, reconstruction with others, and restitution to others of their difference non indifferent to the difference of others. In this way, translation can contribute to the possibility of planetary interconnection without closed communities. Instead of closed communities we must work for communities made of signs that are different, but without the signs of difference that make difference, without the signs of closed identities, without property, without territories, without ownership, without inequality, without roots. We believe that this is what post- should really be.

References


