

*Metaphorical Creativity and Intercultural Identity in the Context
of Translating Cultures*

Associate Prof. Hsueh-i Chen

National Taiwan Normal University

Abstract

Usually we use the words “to translate” or “translation” to mean translating a word or a sentence from a language to another. By combining the words of translation and cultures in plural as “translating cultures,” we emphasize both the linguistic and cultural dimension of translation. We use “translating cultures” as a questioning metaphor, asking whether cultures can be translated as we do with languages.

“Translating cultures” on one hand seems to underline the difficulty or impossibility of cultural translation; on the other hand, it appears to integrate the linguistic and cultural aspects of translation. It implies that by the action of translation, we do not only linguistically transfer meaning, we also transmit cultural implications. Whether interpreting translation in its linguistic and/or cultural dimension, what is relevant for the concept of translating cultures is the emphasis on the necessity of simultaneity of linguistic and cultural mediation. This is especially the case for philosophy, which is often articulated in a subtle form of language and is deeply rooted in cultural tradition. In particular, intercultural philosophy focuses on mediation, as the prefix “inter-” as in “in-between” does not only represent cultural discrepancies but also possible connections between and despite differences.

Regarding the mediation of translating cultures within the scope of intercultural philosophy, we have to expand the horizon of questioning beyond translation sciences. This paper does not

explore methods of translation but attempts to understand the linguistic conditions and cultural circumstances of translating culturally and interculturally, respectively.

As the title of this paper suggests, there are two questionable areas concerning the idea of translating cultures. The first refers to language and the second to identity. The first issue of translating cultures deals with creativity in languages and refers to how words relate to meanings within language or between languages; translation would not be a problem if there is always a distinct equivalent, but the reality is that we do not simply find a corresponding word or concept in the existing linguistic reservoir of language. The process of translating culture is rather analogous to a metaphor. In the case of metaphor, we have to be creative to make new linguistic connections and connotations by the action of translation; it is a question of broadening semantic innovations and creating new references of meaning. By analyzing the process of metaphors, we might understand the creativity involved in and be aware of problems we might encounter in translating cultures.

The second concern of this paper refers to the question of identity. At first sight, it is perhaps incomprehensible why the question of identity is raised in the case of a translation issue and why the adjective “intercultural” is combined with identity, whereas “cultural identity” is used in everyday language. The reason to emphasize the question of identity is that translations occurs between human beings with different cultural backgrounds and identities. Translating cultures occurs as the interchange and overlapping of cultural identities. There are two hermeneutical entanglements when dealing with translating cultures. The first entanglement concerns the role of translator and his/her relation to its readers. The second is about translators’ and readers’

attempts to transgress themselves in the sense of understanding themselves through other cultures. The basic motivation of translating cultures can perhaps be specified as the feeling of strangeness. Through the action of translating cultures, something strange becomes familiar. It is an intercultural process in action and in the long run, we could even use the term “incorporation.” Actually, the question involving translating cultures is not only about translating texts, but more metaphorically, how to translate one’s cultural influence interculturally. Translation is like dialogue; it is not only a dialogue between culturally formed strangers, but also between selves (or selves as strangers). Words in texts have their meanings and are situated in certain contexts, but their meanings develop with interpretations (in the double sense of “to interpret” and “to translate”). We as human beings develop our identities by interpreting differently and evolving ourselves interculturally as well.

In this paper, the author will follow the intellectual steps Paul Ricoeur made in his exposition of metaphor and theory of translation, contextualizing with his concept of oneself as another and combining them with author’s attempt to explain intercultural identity.