

Encoding/Decoding as Translation

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This article asks what would happen if media scholars developed a theory of translation that responded to the specific concerns of their field. It responds by revisiting a foundational text—Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding”—to see what insights it provides into translation. It proposes three axioms: (1) To use a sign is to transform it; (2) to transform a sign is to translate it; and (3) communication is translation. These axioms cast *translation* in a new light: It is a transformative substitution, where translators are not necessarily people who seek to reexpress something in a new language, but everyone who speaks. This article concludes by identifying an ethics incipient in “Encoding/Decoding,” a politics of invention articulated against a utopian horizon, but grounded in everyday interactions.

Keywords: communication theory, cultural translation, Stuart Hall, Charles Peirce, translation studies

Consider a common experience: You are reading a news website. The story is about refugees in a war-torn country crossing the border into a neighboring country. The reporter has interviewed the refugees and their reluctant hosts, and by all appearances, both groups speak perfect English. Surely, you think to yourself, that cannot be: In that part of the world, English is unlikely to be people’s first language. How is it they are fluent here?

Odds are good you are right. The people the reporter quotes most likely spoke their native tongue, and because the reporter knows that you (like her other readers) speak English, she translated what they said. But this act of translation is not innocent. Translation is not straightforward, because no language maps neatly onto another. Power is always at play when people create one text to represent another. Who has the authority to choose this interpretation over that one? How do they come by that authority? How do they maintain it? These questions are pressing in a world where the pace of globalization is always accelerating. As media converge and governments liberalize the trade of cultural (and other) goods, we come into ever greater contact with people unlike ourselves. Much (perhaps most) of this contact is through television, radio, or the Internet. Translation’s importance for media scholars cannot be overstated.

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Yet translation is an object that we media scholars, especially within the cultural studies tradition, have only begun to consider. Apart from the short-lived *International Journal of Media and Translation Studies* or occasional articles or book chapters (e.g., Guldin, 2012; Moran, 2009; Rohn, 2011; Uribe-Jongbloed & Espinosa-Medina, 2014; Wilke & Rosenberger, 1994), where are we talking about translation? Virtually nowhere: "Language and translation have been systematically neglected in the current literature on globalization" (Bielsa & Bassnett, 2009, p. 18). "To a large extent, media, cultural and globalization studies have essentially ignored questions of language and translation" (Demont-Heinrich, 2011, p. 402). "Despite some early opportunities, translation and communication have had little to 'say' directly to one another" (Striphas, 2006, p. 234).

In this respect, the recent Special Section on Translations in the *International Journal of Communication* is encouraging. It grew out of a 2014 panel at the International Communication Association conference, and it featured "analyses on the role of translations and translators in the 21st-century international communication landscape" (Sigismondi, 2016, p. 860). Still, it showed the strange place translation occupies in media (and communication) studies: Despite appearing in one of the field's major journals, most of the scholars were "rooted in other disciplines, in particular translation studies" (Sigismondi, 2016, p. 861).²

Translation scholars, in contrast, have a healthy interest in media. They have written extensively about dubbing and subtitling in its technical, cultural, and political aspects (e.g., Chiaro, Heiss, & Bucaria, 2008; Gambier, 2003; Nedergaard-Larsen, 1993). Or, to follow my earlier example, they have asked how journalists act as translators. In the past five years, the field's flagship journals have published a number of special issues on journalism and translation (e.g., Conway, 2015a; Valdeón, 2012). But scholars trained in media studies are largely absent from this research: In a comprehensive discussion of the history of news translation research, Roberto Valdeón (2015) identifies only a handful.

One obstacle we face as media scholars is that much of the relevant research takes as its starting point a set of concerns we do not necessarily share. Historically, translation studies grew out of linguistics on the one hand and literature on the other (Venuti, 2000), and its theories and methods reflect the preoccupations of those fields. How do notions of equivalence shape translators' choices? How do stories find new readers when they are rewritten in other languages? The field of translation studies has developed powerful tools for describing textual transformations, and it has shone light on the cultural nuances that influence how different people see the world, but what media scholars need is a theory of

² Of course, in saying this, I recognize that academic fields do not exist a priori. They are essentially contested, to borrow an idea from W. B. Gallie (1962): Their boundaries are porous, and questions about what constitutes them evoke a range of relatively coherent yet contested answers, none of which is inherently correct. At their least restrictive, they allow like-minded scholars to find each other and serve as a shorthand for shared interests. At their most restrictive, they enable certain scholars to decide that this topic is in, but that one is out. In the case of media studies and translation studies, the two fields overlap, but the authors, theoretical paradigms, and objects of study they treat as central still differ (Craig, 1999; Venuti, 2000).

translation that corresponds to the specific concerns of our field, such as audiences' capacities for resistance to the messages they see and hear.

Hence my purpose in this article. I revisit a foundational text in media studies and ask what insights it provides into translation. The text is Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" (1973/1980), which I read alongside other essays of his from the same time, such as his interpretation of Marx's "Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy" (Hall, 1973/2003). He says of his interpretation of Marx, "It is, of course, *not* a reading *tabula rasa*, not a reading 'without presuppositions.' It reflects my own problematic, inevitably" (Hall, 1973/2003, p. 113). The same is true of my interpretation of "Encoding/Decoding": It is a reading *à contre-courant*, against the grain, for the purpose of identifying unrecognized, unexplored, and unrealized potential in one of the canonical texts of media studies.

This potential resides in the theories that inform Hall's argument. Thus, after an overview of the range of ideas evoked by the term *translation*, I retrace Hall's path through Marx (1857/1970), Peirce (1940), and Vološinov (1929/1986). The theory I propose derives from Hall's concern for how producers and viewers interpret television programming. He spends most of "Encoding/Decoding" describing the mechanics of polysemy, or the ways signs fail to fix meaning. He argues that there is a semiotic gap between the moments of encoding and decoding, and it is the condition of possibility for viewers' resistance in that it allows them to read against producers' intentions. I go further and argue that the gap structures every act of communication as an act of translation. Producers and viewers interpret programs (and other acts of communication) differently. Put another way, signs, as they are constituted in subjective experience, change between the moments of encoding and decoding: The decoded sign translates the encoded sign. I maintain this emphasis on mechanics to show how the field of media studies, with its concrete concerns situated in specific historical moments, provides a prism through which we can view key terms such as *communication*, *transformation*, and *translation*. Seen through that prism, the meanings of those terms shift.

My argument consists in describing those shifts. They are encapsulated in the following axioms:

1. To use a sign is to transform it.
2. To transform a sign is to translate it.
3. Communication is translation.

Together, these axioms address some of the key concerns in media studies, particularly those that relate to active audiences. They cast *translation* in a new light: It comes to mean a transformative substitution, where translators are no longer (necessarily) people who set out to reexpress a text in a new language, but everyone who speaks.

In "Encoding/Decoding," Hall (1973/1980) is also interested in the political implications of the gap he identifies. Indeed, most scholars who followed Hall focused on forms of viewer resistance rather than what makes resistance possible (e.g., Fiske, 1987; Jenkins, 2008; Morley, 1980, to name only the

most influential).³ In that vein, I conclude this article by considering the political and ethical dimensions of communication as translation. I borrow from translation scholars such as Boris Buden and Stefan Nowotny (2009) who ask, among other things, how the introduction of cultural otherness affects a community whose members share a common sense of identity. Reading Hall in light of their ideas helps us see in his argument a broader inquiry into the relationship between language, the politics of contestation, and an ethics of alterity. Moreover, it helps us see how the ethics incipient in "Encoding/Decoding" takes the form of a politics of invention, articulated against a utopian horizon, but grounded in everyday interactions. Ultimately, this article puts media studies into conversation with translation studies: Not only does it ask what a theory of translation would look like if it responded to the concerns of media studies, but it also enters into the debate in translation studies about the nature of its object of study.

Disciplining Terms

Why is it that media scholars have neglected questions of translation? Ted Striphas (2006) speculates that they see translation in narrow terms—a form of linguistic reexpression that transforms an original text in one language into a copy in another. Thus they see it as a rare phenomenon that produces a lesser or degraded product. Translators for them possess a marginal status, and besides, doesn't comparative literature deal with translation?

But there are bigger issues related to what we use the words *communication* and *translation* to describe. They are slippery terms, and we must first discipline them, in two senses—we must put them in their intellectual context, and we must be clear about the meanings we intend. First, there is a historical context to consider. Etymologically, both *translation* and *communication* convey ideas of transfer. *Communication* comes from the Latin word meaning to "make common to many, impart" (Williams, 1983, p. 72). It is closely linked to the idea of transport, although *transport* tends to refer to "physical carriage of people and goods," whereas *communication* refers to movement of "information and ideas" (Williams, 1983, p. 72). Similarly, *translation* comes from the Latin word meaning "to carry across," an idea that remains current in geometry, where *translation* refers to the repetition of a shape at a new set of coordinates. But we must recognize that both terms have taken on richer meanings over time, which have not gone uncontested. "Transmission" is not the only way to understand communication, as James Carey (1988) argues, just as "carrying across" is not the only way to understand translation. The practice of translation has evolved, as have the words used to describe it, as made clear in the literary traditions in English, French, and German, to name only three major European languages (Berman, 1988).

Consequently, contemporary uses are not always clear, either. Striphas (2006) is right when he suggests that one reason communication scholars have not paid translation much heed is that it appears to be an unproblematic form of reexpression. In some cases, they are at least partially right: When texts tend toward the denotational, such as in much technical writing, transfer between languages can be relatively straightforward (Jumpelt, 1961; Krein-Kühle, 2011). But in other cases, they are wrong: When texts rely on connotation and nuance, reexpression is anything but straightforward. In fact, in Walter

³ To be fair, in chapter 6 of *Television Culture*, John Fiske (1987) does list a number of devices TV producers use to produce polysemy within their programs.

Benjamin's influential 1923 essay on the task of the translator, we read that "a translation that seeks to transmit something can transmit nothing other than a message—that is, something inessential" (1923/1997, p. 151). It is a counter-intuitive statement, one that points to the inadequacy of linguistic reexpression to convey embedded cultural meanings.

And of course, to raise the question of culture—which is itself a term with a complicated history (Williams, 1983)—is to raise the question of hermeneutics, or interpretation, or more simply, "explaining the meaning, 'making sense of' what others have difficulty understanding" (Pöchhacker, 2004, p. 10). But these terms, too, have come to present certain difficulties. For some, the term *translation* has expanded to mean any act of interpretation, although others want to maintain the distinction between the terms: *Translation* as linguistic reexpression implies varying degrees of interpretation, but *interpretation* does not always imply linguistic reexpression (Trivedi, 2005).⁴

Despite all of this, a number of translation scholars have, in fact, argued that communication is translation. For instance, this claim grounds George Steiner's (1975/1998) argument in *After Babel*, an important work during the early days of translation studies. Understanding is synonymous with translation, Steiner writes, because "no two historical epochs, no two social classes, no two localities use words and syntax to signify the same things, to send identical signals of valuation and inference. Neither do two human beings" (p. 47). Or, by Paul Ricoeur's (2006) account, because meaning is never transparent, we misunderstand each other, even when we speak the same language. And because "it is always possible to say the same thing in another way" (p. 25, emphasis in original), we can—and must—work to make ourselves understood: "That is why we have never ceased making ourselves clear, making ourselves clear with words and sentences, making ourselves clear to others who do not see things from the same angle as we do" (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 27). Striphas (2006) echoes this sentiment when he argues that communication is a form of *intralingual* (rather than *interlingual*) transfer, to borrow from Roman Jakobson (1959). Thus, "As understood from the standpoint of translation, communication refers to the processes by which we first interpolate another's [speech] into, and then interpret it using, our own unique sign systems" (Striphas, 2006, p. 239).

Steiner, Ricoeur, and Striphas are right as far as they go, but as I argue later, they do not go far enough. For them, translation takes place between speakers' idiolects, which derive from their "background, upbringing, environment, and so forth" (Striphas, 2006, p. 236). Thus idiolects are relatively stable—our background and upbringing do not change. But they fail to see other sources, particularly social interactions where our ongoing exchange of ideas takes place. As a consequence, they miss the ways idiolects are linked in a dynamic relationship of mutual dependence that renders their stability, such as it is, merely relative. What I want to do here is propose a distinct, precise meaning for *translation*, one that exceeds the competing, traditional definitions from translation studies and reveals a different dimension of the phenomenon. Translation, I argue, is a form of transformative substitution: Signs change from one use to the next, with the transformed sign replacing the one that came before it.

⁴ To further complicate matters, *interpreting*, as opposed to *interpretation*, has a precise technical meaning, that of verbal re-expression "performed 'here and now' for the benefit of people who want to engage in communication across barriers of language and culture" (Pöchhacker, 2004, p. 10).

Axiom 1: To Use a Sign Is to Transform It

The idea that in “Encoding/Decoding” Hall is describing something akin to translation is not terribly farfetched. His first move is to reject the sender/message/receiver model dominant in mass communication research, particularly its premise that *communication* is a synonym of *transmission*.⁵ Instead, he says, it is useful to

think of this process in terms of a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments—production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction. This would be to think of the process as a “complex structure in dominance,” sustained through the articulation of connected practices, each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence. (Hall, 1973/1980, p. 128)

In other words, communication is “a continuous circuit—production-distribution-production—[that] can be sustained through a ‘passage of forms’” (Hall, 1973/1980, p. 128).

It is in this passage of forms that signs are transformed (and ultimately in this transformation that translation takes place). Hall arrives at this argument by way of Marx’s (1857/1970) “Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy.” Marx says it is a mistake to isolate production from consumption as if they were distinct acts, as earlier political economists had done. Instead, he says, it is necessary to recognize that production and consumption are inseparable, like the recto and verso of a sheet of paper, and that they mutually produce each other: “Production produces consumption: 1. by providing the material of consumption; 2. by determining the mode of consumption; 3. by creating in the consumer a need for objects which it first presents as products” (Marx, 1857/1970, p. 133; cf. Hall, 1973/2003). At the same time,

Consumption produces production in two ways . . . 1. Because a product becomes a real product only through consumption . . . [and] 2. Because consumption creates the need for *new* production and therefore provides production with the conceptual, intrinsically actuating reason for production, which is the precondition for production. (Marx, 1857/1970, pp. 131–132)

For Hall, with regard to television, this relationship between production and consumption raises an important semiotic question. The imbrication of production and consumption is apparent in producers’ and viewers’ interest in each other. Producers anticipate how viewers will watch a show, based on their assumptions about viewers and the feedback they receive, and they adjust their decisions accordingly.

⁵ Interestingly, Rainer Guldin (2012), one of the rare scholars to propose a translation theory grounded in the field of communication, takes the sender/message/receiver model as his starting point. He arrives at conclusions similar to mine, particularly the idea that *communication*, *translation*, and *transformation* all describe different aspects of the same phenomenon. Guldin’s approach differs from mine in that he focuses on the metaphor of translation rather than the mechanics of polysemy.

Similarly, viewers take into account producers' intentions, at least as they perceive them, as they interpret the programs they watch.

The objects that undergo a "passage of forms" in this circuit are "meanings and messages in the form of sign-vehicles" that are brought together in a "syntagmatic chain of discourse" (Hall, 1973/1980, p. 128) such as a television program. The messages are not fixed: The meanings producers intend may or may not match the meanings viewers arrive at. Indeed, programs evoke a wide range of meanings for viewers, depending on their frameworks of knowledge, their relation to the means of production, and the technical infrastructure at their disposal.

The mechanics of this passage of forms are important for a theory of translation. "Sign-vehicles" are a particular type of sign, in Charles Peirce's (1940) sense, in that they are "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (p. 99). Like all signs, they evoke "in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign" (Peirce, 1940, p. 99), which Peirce calls an *interpretant*. And because interpretants are also signs, signification takes the form of a chain of associations: A first sign evokes a second (its interpretant) which evokes a third (the interpretant's interpretant), and so on.

One problem with Peirce's use of the term *sign* is it refers to two different things: material signs (Hall's sign-vehicle) and subjective signs (Peirce's interpretants). I want to maintain the distinction between material and subjective signs, but I also want to stress, as Hall suggests, that they are mutually constitutive. A sign, by Peirce's account, must have at least two parts—that which "stands to somebody for something" (1940, p. 99) and the "something" itself. In other words, the patterns of lights and sounds that producers have put together do not become a material sign until they activate meanings—or evoke subjective signs—for viewers. Or, in Hall's terms, a TV show does not become a sign until it is viewed. For that reason, I will maintain this distinction, but I will also refer to *material/subjective signs* to describe the dynamic wholes they form together.⁶

This distinction helps us see that the material signs—the programs themselves—do not vary. What varies are the subjective signs, or the chains of associations that change from viewer to viewer. It is this level of meaning that interests Hall: The potential for politics resides in the gap between producers' and viewers' subjective signs. Of course, the range of plausible interpretations is not infinite. In fact, the

⁶ This distinction between material and subjective signs needs clarification. First, it looks like Saussure's (1916/1995) distinction between signifier and signified, but it is not. Strictly speaking, Saussure's signifiers are "sound images," whereas material signs exist in the world outside speakers' psyches. Similarly, Saussure's signifieds are concepts evoked by sound images, but they do not operate in a chain, as in Peirce's conception. Second, I have chosen not to call material signs *objective* (as the inverse of *subjective*) because the term would be misleading to the degree it implied that the meanings TV shows (and other material signs) were fixed. Finally, this distinction is only heuristic. V. N. Vološinov (1929/1986) demonstrates that material conditions always impinge on our subjective experience of language, so much so that language is a material fact that exists outside of speakers' individual psyches. For a discussion of how this observation relates to media and translation, see Conway (2015b).

range of acceptable interpretations is relatively limited. A constellation of social forces works to place bounds on the interpretations viewers arrive at. Paraphrasing V. N. Vološinov (1929/1986), Hall (1973/1980) identifies these forces as ideology: "Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested" (p. 134). This imposition happens at the level of the individual utterance in ways consistent with Hall's circuit, as Mikhail Bakhtin, one of Vološinov's contemporaries,⁷ points out. Speakers anticipate how others will respond to them, and they try to preempt any objections:

When constructing my utterance, I try actively to determine this response. Moreover, I try to act in accordance with the response I anticipate, so this anticipated response, in turn, exerts an active influence on my utterance (I parry objections that I foresee, I make all kinds of provisos, and so forth). (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 95)

Or, as Hall (1973/1980) writes about television, "Encoding will have the effect of constructing some limits and parameters within which decodings will operate" (p. 135). Of course, whether viewers interpret what they see within those limits is another matter. Hall's argument here is well known: Viewers adopt a range of reading positions, from the dominant/hegemonic (where they fall within those limits) to the negotiated (where they recognize those limits, but do not accede to the pressures that set them) to the oppositional (where they recognize those limits and reject them).

How does Hall's circuit support the idea that to use a sign is to transform it? Material signs anchor different signification chains for producers and viewers: The material sign remains the same, but the subjective signs differ. In other words, producers' associative chains, mediated through the material sign, take a different shape for viewers. This transformation is inevitable—so long as producers and viewers are different people, it is a built-in feature of television's communicative process.

Axiom 2: To Transform a Sign Is to Translate It

My argument to this point is not original. Although I emphasize the mechanics of polysemy over its implications, any close reading of "Encoding/Decoding" is likely to arrive at a similar point.

Here is where I propose something new. The mechanics I describe apply to more than just television, but television serves as a useful example because it illustrates a counter-intuitive idea: Transformation occurs every time we use a material sign. It occurs at the level of the subjective signs with which it is paired: The encoded material/subjective sign transforms when it is decoded because the subjective part changes. The same principle applies to language as to television. When I say a word, the material sign—the sound that travels from my lips through the air to your ears—is the same for you and me, but the subjective signs it evokes are not.

⁷ It might be the case that books attributed to Vološinov were in fact Bakhtin's. Some attribute *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* to Bakhtin. See the translators' note in Vološinov (1929/1986). Whatever the case, my point is the same.

This transformation also takes place when a material sign is repeated. Despite what common sense might suggest, a repeated material sign is not self-identical. That is, the second iteration is not identical to the first because its subjective counterpart—without which it would not be a sign—changes. To return to Hall's television example, consider what happens when we watch a program we have seen before and notice something new that becomes salient only because we are watching it again. The program as a material sign is linked to different subjective signs when it is repeated. In this respect, the program we watch a second time is not identical to the program we watched the first time: The mediation each performs between subjective signs is different.

Here again, the same applies to language. Consider an example given by Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/1995), which I extend here (and read abusively).⁸ He speaks of a chairman who calls a meeting to order by crying, "Messieurs! Messieurs! Messieurs!"—"Gentleman! Gentleman! Gentleman!" (p. 150). We can imagine him exasperated as he pounds his gavel. The first "messieurs" catches the attendees' attention. The second calls them to order. The third is a mild reproach for not paying attention. Catching their attention lets him call them to order, and calling them to order lets him express his reproach.

Saussure's example points to ways our experience of words is both individual and social. It is individual in that we all live different lives and encounter words in different places. It is social in that it is shared: To communicate, I must constantly take into account the ways others have used a word before me. As Vološinov (1929/1986) writes,

A word presents itself not as an item of vocabulary but as a word that has been used in a wide variety of utterances by co-speaker A, co-speaker B, co-speaker C and so on, and has been variously used in the speaker's own utterances. (p. 70)

I am also addressing my words to someone. That is, when I respond to you, I agree or disagree or acquiesce, support, challenge, negotiate, or otherwise engage with you, but in each case, I take account of what you have said, of how you were responding to people before you, and how you are likely to respond to me. Words accumulate associations through this ongoing act of taking account: Your speech echoes in mine, just as the speech of people before you echoes in yours.

In other words, context—the set of events that have shaped how we take a given word's prior uses into account—shapes the play between subjective signs. My focus is on linguistic events, but always in tension with the other parts of the environment we deem relevant. The individual and social aspects of context stand in dialectical tension with each other: The social renders context relatively stable, whereas the individual makes it potentially idiosyncratic. We can draw two conclusions: First, transformation occurs with every act of communication, not just television. Second, as material/subjective signs change, the new signs substitute for the old.

⁸ For Saussure, the important thing is that all three words have a certain identity—they are the same word—despite the differences I describe. See Tullio de Mauro's commentary (in the introduction to Saussure, 1995).

This idea of substitution bears much in common with the conventional notion of translation as the substitution of a word in one language for a word in another. The field of translation studies has shown that such substitution is paradoxical. It has long hinged on ideas of equivalence (Hu, 1992a, 1992b; Nida 1964/2000), but such ideas are deceptive, as I note above, because no language maps neatly onto another, and no word in one language captures exactly the same thing as its “equivalent” in another. Even within a language, there are no true synonyms. Substitution based on equivalence is approximate at best. At the same time, the word that substitutes for another cannot be just any word: It is constrained to refer to the same thing in the world as the first. It always vacillates between equivalence and nonequivalence. It has no sense if equivalence is not a concern, but it can approach equivalence only asymptotically. The second word is tethered to the first, but the rope has some slack.

The question we should be asking is not whether we can pull the words together, but how much we can tighten the slack. Consider how we explain new words (or new meanings) every day. We might use a word that does not evoke for our listener what we want it to evoke, but we are reflexive and can talk about what we mean. We explain, answer questions, rephrase, and ultimately try to persuade. Approximate substitution—what I mean when I speak of translation—is good enough. In fact, it makes any exchange of ideas possible. Hence the concern for an expanded understanding of translation: This relative substitutability makes communication possible, but it is always only relative.

Thus we arrive at Axiom 2: To transform a sign is to translate it. Whenever we use a material/subjective sign, it is transformed because its subjective dimension changes from one person to the next. The transformation means a new material/subjective sign substitutes for an old one. This substitution has the structure of translation: It is made on the basis of an approximate equivalence. At the same time, translation implies transformation: Substitution is always approximate. Change is unavoidable.

Axiom 3: Communication Is Translation

The first two axioms form a syllogism. If to use a sign is to transform it, and to transform it is to translate it, then it follows that to use a sign is to translate it. In other words, communication takes the structure of translation: It functions through the successive substitution of material/subjective signs.

Here is where we find the arguments by Steiner, Ricoeur, and Striphas according to which communication is translation. Here is also where I diverge. Communication for Steiner et al. always implies an active agent, someone doing the work of translation—substituting one set of words for another, saying the same thing in another way—to understand or to be understood. In contrast, I do not presuppose any such agent: Translation occurs whether we seek it or not. Thus what I am proposing moves us away from the historical focus of translation studies, which is the relationship between an original text and a translated text (depicted in the center of Figure 1). Most translation scholars have followed it implicitly, or if not, have been obligated to reject it explicitly. This pattern can be seen in the various turns in translation studies, from the field’s double origins in linguistics and literary studies through the cultural turn of the 1980s and 1990s to the various paths researchers are pursuing now (Snell-Hornby, 2010). It is around this relationship that the field coheres.

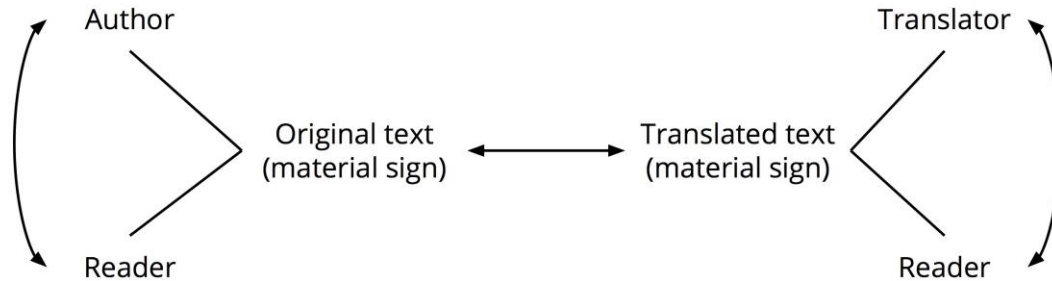


Figure 1. Different translational relationships.

My formulation shifts our attention to the relationship signaled by the arrows on the right and left of my diagram—the substitution of subjective signs from author to reader (or speaker to listener or producer to viewer) that takes place in every act of communication. It is here that media and translation scholars can help each other see their fields in a new light, especially with respect to politics.

The field of media studies, as it developed within the cultural studies tradition, has been political from its beginnings. For Hall, the semiotic gap between producers and viewers (or speakers and listeners or authors and readers) is the condition of possibility for politics in that it opens up a space for contesting meaning. Because a television show (or any sign) supports more than one reading, people can disagree about what it means. Viewers adopt reading positions with respect to a program and, more broadly, the social forces that shaped it. Their disagreement is not merely a question of semantics. Instead, it is a form of reframing, or of attempting to shape the basic, taken-for-granted semiotic tools people use to make sense of the world. John Fiske (1987) describes this process as an exercise of “semiotic democracy,” where viewers are “equipped with the discursive competencies to make meanings and motivated by pleasure to want to participate in the process” (p. 95). The resulting politics derives from the space that opens up where people can imagine a different world they can work toward.

The Politics and Ethics of Alterity

Most television studies research (especially what now falls under the “acafandom” rubric) has examined how viewers use shows for purposes other than passive entertainment, by creating communities and pooling their knowledge about texts and industries (e.g., Jenkins, 2008; Johnson, 2013). The field of translation studies suggests a way to take this politics a step further: The relationships of nonidentity between encoded and decoded signs also open up a space for an inventive politics inflected through the concerns of ethics.

I take my cues here from two sources within translation studies. The first is the debate about ethics and hospitality, which is bounded by hope on the one hand and a vicious paradox on the other. Ricoeur (2006) presents the hopeful case: “Linguistic hospitality [is] where the pleasure of dwelling in the

other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one's own welcoming house" (p. 10). Jacques Derrida, in contrast, sees in translation a "first act of violence":

That is where the question of hospitality begins: must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language, in all senses of the term, in all its possible extensions, before being able and so as to be able to welcome him into our country? If he was already speaking our language, with all that that implies, if we already shared everything that is shared with a language, would the foreigner still be a foreigner and could we speak of asylum or hospitality in regard to him? (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000, pp. 15–17)

Between hope and violence, there is what Amit Pinchevski (2005) identifies as the potential for a "nonalienating foreignness: a relation preceding and exceeding any common ground, site or lingo" where we might establish "a nonassimilatory relation consisting in an exposure to the Other, in proximity, in a nonunifying affinity" (p. 149).

The second source is the debate about cultural translation, a widely contested term among translation scholars because of its competing meanings from anthropology and postcolonial studies. In anthropology, it usually refers to efforts to explain to one group of people how another sees the world. In postcolonial studies, it usually refers to ways people maneuver their way through their new environment when they move from one place to another—how they describe things for which they do not know the words or work to compensate for misunderstandings that arise from the unspoken assumptions they have about the world that their interlocutors do not share (see Conway, 2012, 2013). My interest here is in the second definition, the one from postcolonial studies, because of the way it has raised questions of our interactions with those we perceive as other. It, too, is characterized by hope and the potential for violence. In the first instance, Homi Bhabha (1994) sees the movement of people and ideas as a mechanism by which "newness enters the world" (p. 212). By this he means that the introduction of a foreign element into a domestic context destabilizes notions of both *foreign* and *domestic*, allowing a hybrid term to emerge. This hybridity holds the potential to allow people to break out of the strictures that govern their interactions, which produce and maintain forms of inequality. In the second, Tomislav Longinovic (2002) warns that this destabilization cuts both ways: Its utopian potential is held in check by immigrants' frequently subaltern position where their agency is limited by the "double bind of global inequality, or fearful asymmetry, in the rate and value of minor culture's representation" (p. 6).

The potential for this new space resides, as Pinchevski (2005) intimates, in the relationship of nonidentity between encoded and decoded signs. Hall says of viewers that they can oppose producers' intended message. We can go further, given the translational structure of communication. As we interact with others, we can also take advantage of this gap to invent ways to welcome strangers who have come to live among us.

I mean *invention* here in the sense that derives from classical rhetoric, where it refers to the ability "to see the available means of persuasion in each case" (Aristotle, 2007, p. 36). That is, invention is about finding the right words to be persuasive in a specific situation. It is contingent on context.

Likewise, the moment where cultural translation's utopian or dystopian potential is realized is not decided in advance, but is contingent on historical circumstances. It is in this contingent moment that Boris Buden and Stefan Nowotny (2009) locate the political. By their account, immigrants who do not speak the majority language in their new home constantly give a wrong answer in that they are out of sync, zigging when they should zag, not yet able to meet the unspoken expectations of the people around them. Buden and Nowotny illustrate what I am calling a politics of invention through a metaphor they borrow from a poem by Bertolt Brecht. A man, they write, is applying for U.S. citizenship. He answers "1492" to every question the judge asks, and the judge realizes that the man does not speak English. The judge then asks when Columbus discovered America, at which point the man's answer is correct. Buden and Nowotny argue that the judge posed the correct question to a wrong answer, which leads them to ask, "Is 'democracy' simply a wrong answer still waiting for a correct question? The search for this question, and nothing else, is cultural translation" (p. 207). In effect, they argue that the members of the community into which displaced people enter are implicated in the negotiation of cultural translation, too. Cultural translation cannot be separated from the ethical dimension of people's encounter with cultural others.

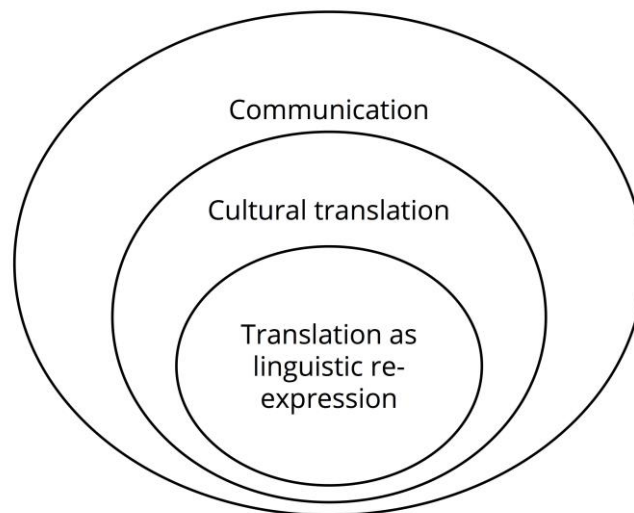


Figure 2. The nested relationships linking communication, cultural translation, and translation as linguistic reexpression.

The value of this idea of cultural translation—the give and take over meaning—is that it raises questions of hospitality, ethics, and alterity. It is a specific type of communication (see Figure 2), one based on an exchange of material and subjective signs, both within a language (as people find new ways to express ideas the other does not understand) and between languages (as people search for ways in their new language to express ideas from their old one). In that respect, translation in the conventional sense (an act of reexpression in a new language) is a specific type of cultural translation, defined by similar goals, but restricted to a narrower range of substitutions. And cultural translation, to the degree it

allows for a certain amount of semiotic play between encoded and decoded signs, is a means by which we can come to see cultural others in a new light.

Conclusion: The Politics and Ethics of Alterity

When Hall (1973/1980) introduces the political dimensions of the encoding/decoding model, he does so with the caveat that the "hypothetical positions from which decodings of a televisual discourse may be constructed . . . need to be empirically tested and refined" (p. 136). The same caveat applies to my sketch of an ethics of alterity: The inventive politics I propose will need to be empirically tested and refined. To do that, we should ask what strategies people employ to privilege one set of interpretants over another, especially where power and influence come into play. Have people used the logic of translation to invent ways to open space for those they perceive as different, whose presence might otherwise cause them anxiety? If so, how? And what can we conclude about a politics of invention more broadly?

I wrote in the introduction that I hope to open new avenues of investigation in media studies. Consider my example of news translation. Journalists frequently reexpress things their interviewees say in the language of their audience. Indeed, this reexpression has been the focus of most research on news translation. But what if we think of communication as a generalized form of translation? What happens, for instance, when journalists dig deep into a story to give their audiences a more nuanced understanding of how some group of cultural others understands the world? For instance, after Canada's federal election in 2015, the new Liberal government gave visas to 25,000 Syrian refugees. Imagine a journalist who wants to give her readers a sense of how the refugees have experienced their new environment. Perhaps the people she interviews express themselves in English, and they cause readers to see their familiar world through new eyes. Through her story, even if there is no need to reexpress ideas in a different language, she will have substituted new signs for old, as readers will have new associations to account for in their own speech. She will have translated Syrian refugees for Canadians. Will she also have helped open a space for them in Canada's cultural fabric?

I also wrote that I hope to contribute to debates in translation studies about the field's object of study.⁹ What would happen, I wonder, if translation studies shifted emphasis away from translators (in the narrow sense) as the locus of translation, because the translation I describe happens with every use of a sign? And what if the field looked instead at everyday actors (translators in a broad sense) who negotiate their way through a complex semiotic world by putting the tools of translation (broadly conceived) to work? Not that translation studies should abandon the focus on translators in the narrow sense. On the contrary, people trained in the profession of translation are keenly sensitive to the intricacies of the questions I have posed here, and their experience can provide important insight into the broad notion of translation I propose.

Here is where the fields of media studies and translation studies intersect. In what ways do conventional notions of translation provide a model for understanding what I am proposing? And in what

⁹ I express this hope with a certain humility, in light of the fact that my formal training is in communication.

ways do my proposals extend what we know about conventional notions of translation? Answering these questions will require media and translation scholars to talk to each other. It is a dialogue that will challenge—and benefit—both our fields of study.

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