

Ecologies of Translation, Translations of Ecologies: Between Ecolinguistics and Translation Studies

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In several of his works, Peter Mühlhäusler makes an important observation regarding the relation between the preservation of endangered languages and translation. Mühlhäusler claims that languages do not simply map or objectively represent the same external reality, but actively construct these representations over long periods of adapting to particular environments. As he writes,

“an important consequence of the constructivist approach is that languages are strictly speaking not translatable, as each of them suggests a different perspective on reality. It is the diversity of perspectives constructed that is of ecological importance. Not only are languages well adapted to the environmental conditions they developed in, linguistic diversity is also a resource of environmental knowledge.”¹

Conversely, he argues, if all languages were totally inter-translatable, the loss of linguistic diversity would merely represent a decrease in the superficial surface structures of fundamentally identical languages.² However, as he claims, the general trend in globalization has been one towards total inter-translatability with Standard Average European languages.³ New national languages such as Bhasa Indonesia are developed with the precise intent of being fully intertranslatable with the languages of the West. Moreover, he writes, the relative ease with which we can translate between SAE languages is not an endorsement of total effability, since these languages share almost total conceptual and structural overlap⁴. For Mühlhäusler, linguistic diversity is important since it constitutes a diverse pool of knowledge about environmental sustainability from which we can draw. In this sense, it is precisely the impossibility of the translatability of languages that necessarily obligates us to preserve them. Attempts to protect individual languages in isolation from environmental factors through their documentation in grammars and dictionaries have for the most part proven unsuccessful. Rather, Mühlhäusler argues that languages depend on an ‘ecological support system’,⁵ which includes consideration of factors such as other languages from which to borrow and internal

¹ Mühlhäusler 2003 60

² Mühlhäusler 2003 120

³ Mühlhäusler 1996 307

⁴ Mühlhäusler 2003 60

⁵ Mühlhäusler 1996 276

dialect variation. An ecological theory of linguistic preservation must thus ask “what is the support system that sustains a language economy over time?”⁶ In this sense, the preservation of linguistic diversity is analogous to that of protecting species. Attempts to conserve individual species outside of ecosystemic considerations have also generally failed. The idea, Harmon writes, is not to preserve individual species, but the *processes* of speciation⁷. Indeed, many ecolinguists now refer to ‘linguistic speciation’ as the object of inquiry when asking “what processes bring languages into being, and how do the nature of these processes affect linguistic ecology?” In other words, our obligations in preserving biocultural diversity would seem to lie not towards an inherent individual right to life itself, but to providing the ecological and formative conditions of life through which life forms; plants, fungi and animals, cultures and languages, can all flourish and blossom interdependently.

What is ecolinguistics, and how ought languages be considered ecologically? Ecolinguistics has its beginnings in a 1972 paper by Einar Haugen entitled “The Ecology of Language”. Haugen adopts the following definition of ecology from Haeckel; “the total science of the organisms’ *relations* to the surrounding environment in which we can count in a wider sense all *conditions of existence*⁸.” For Haugen, the ecology of language is defined as “the study of *interaction* between any given language and its environment.”⁹ In other words, ecology in this sense is used metaphorically, and refers to the relationships the language has to other languages, its socio-historico-political context, in other words, *the environment of language*. A paper presented at the AILA in 1990 by MAK Halliday entitled “New Ways of Meaning” brought the question of environmentalism into the study of linguistic structure itself; *the language of environment*. Halliday criticizes the grammatical metaphor of nominalization in SAE languages for reducing processes to objectified nouns, which he

⁶ Mühlhäusler 1996 322

⁷ Harmon 2002 165

⁸ In Steffensen 2007 5, emphasis mine.

⁹ Haugen 1972 325

argues plays an important role in the ecological crisis. The notion that ‘the environment’ is an object apart from humanity is an example of this grammar. A critique of linguistic structures goes hand in hand with a critique of the language it makes possible and impossible in environmental discourse, referred to alternatively as ‘eco-critical discourse’ or ‘critical discourse analysis’. Of course, as Alwin Fill notes, these two branches must be understood as complementary. Indeed, if the ecological metaphor allows us an alternative methodology for preserving languages with differently encoded constructions of ecological relationality, and we can learn from these languages by borrowing from them and contrasting their structures with our own, not only are we in a better position to talk about environmental issues in progressive and constructive ways, we are constantly developing our awareness of how to preserve the earth’s biocultural diversity; the inextricably linked diversity of languages, cultures, species and ecosystems. As Crystal argues, “The two-way relationship with ecology needs to be developed: not only does an ecological frame of reference enter into language discussion; language issues need to become part of general ecological thinking”.¹⁰

Given the seriousness of these matters, it is surprising how little work has been done on ecolinguistic issues in translation studies. Important theorists like Lawrence Venuti and Michael Cronin have referred to a translational ecology or an ecology of translation, and this paper attempts to build on their insights. If there is a moral imperative, an *ought* which results from the very *is* of biocultural diversity, it seems that the ethics of translation would have a key role to play for the following reasons: ecological relations between languages can be thought of through translation, drawing from the pool of diverse ecological knowledge is impossible without translation (however untranslatable it may be), and also because translation studies and ecolinguistics equally share an important concern. As Cronin writes, “the issue of translation and minority languages is not a peripheral concern for beleaguered

¹⁰ Crystal 2000 98

fans of exotic peoples gabbling in incomprehensible tongues, but the single most important issue in translation studies today”.¹¹ Translation allows us to recalibrate the dominant paradigms of majority languages by revealing their self-heterogeneity and thus challenge their ecological destructivity. Finally, it is because translation, as an ethics of reading¹², can be closely aligned with a concept of ecolinguistics and environmental ethics as ecological literacy. For Verhagen, “the first and basic challenge of the ecolinguistic community is to be Earth literate”, and furthermore “to engage in the political formulation of an ecological identity, where the ecological consciousness is *translated* into the rough and tumble of the value systems that are still predominantly human-centered and mechanistic”.¹³

It is in this sense that the concept of ecosystemic translation I intend to develop here will serve as an articulation between the *ecology of translation*; or the study of the social/political/historical contexts between languages any translation must undertake to ensure the survival of minority languages, and the *translation of ecology*; the embodied practices through which linguistically constructed patterns of sustainable living with other life forms are translated into our dominant paradigms and interrupt their hegemony. Ecosystemic translation, I argue, is thus an embodied, participatory and performative practice situated within a particular linguistic ecology, and charged with the delicate task of providing the conditions of life within this ecology for the integration of elements of another. As such, ecosystemic translation consists of listening to the rhythms of the relational networks which constitute language intra-, inter-, and extra-linguistically through time. Ecosystemic translation understands that the strongest ecosystems are those characterized by flexibility, dynamism, and change, and therefore tirelessly works in the protection of minority languages and ecosystems against the homogenization of anthropocentrism, monolingualism and monoculturalism and globalization. It is thus particularly attuned to learning from the vast and

¹¹ Cronin 2003 144

¹² Lynes 2010, see also Spivak 1993 183

¹³ Verhagen 2000 40-41 my emphasis

diverse systems of traditional ecological knowledge and its embodied practices of sustainable living with other forms of life through a foreignizing and minoritizing of dominant conceptual schemes. Conversely, ecosystemic translation realizes the necessity of strategically staging the representation, however illusory, of minority languages as self-identical in translations from majority to minority linguistic ecosystems. Ever attuned to context, ecosystemic translation can strategically deploy both an ethics of care and the discourse of individual rights in its attempts to preserve biocultural diversity, the very condition of our continued life on the planet.

I: New Models of Science, Double Agency and Participatory Translation

An important starting point for any comparative analysis of ecolinguistics and translation studies is their shared rejection of positivist, dualist, objectivist and reductionist models of traditional science through an emphasis on the invariably normative, contextual and sociopolitical dimensions of research and inquiry. As we will see, claims to objectivity go hand in hand with an individualism of discrete entities incompatible with ecological thinking and the ethics of translation for many of these theorists. The idea that individual languages can be abstracted from the ecological contexts of the communities which speak them has proven unsuccessful in attempts to preserve biocultural diversity. However, as Cronin writes, the natural and social sciences continue to be dominated by a reductionist Newtonian paradigm,¹⁴ the universalist claims of which “provide a powerful underpinning for pretensions to Western cultural superiority”.¹⁵ Cheung adds that “the claims of philosophy and science to universality are false claims disguising the imperialistic tendencies of a master narrative shot through and through with Eurocentric bias.”¹⁶ Venuti is equally critical of what he calls “linguistic-oriented approaches... promot[ing] scientific models of research”¹⁷ as an

¹⁴ Cronin 2006 21.

¹⁵ Cronin 2006 26.

¹⁶ Cheung 2006 93.

¹⁷ Venuti 1998, 1.

impediment to translation studies. “By repressing the heterogeneity of language, the scientific model prevents translators from understanding and evaluating what their practices admit and exclude, and what social relations those practices make possible.”¹⁸ As he explains, linguistics-based approaches to translation “restrict its role in cultural innovation and social change”¹⁹, “reinforce[e] dominant domestic values”²⁰ and “block the ethical and political agenda”²¹ of translation.

Ecolinguist Alwin Fill argues for a participatory scientific approach to linguistics which emphasizes Humboldt’s concept of *wechselwirkung*, or networked mutuality of observing and observed agencies. For Harré et al., both environmental and language studies should reject any claim to a separation between observer and observed, thus precluding the possibility of wholly objective knowledge.²² In this sense, Bang and Døør note that ecolinguistics ought not be understood as merely a branch of linguistics among others, but “a genuine alternative to traditional, positivist linguistics and its paradigm of and for the sciences.”²³ Through critiques of Saussure, Chomsky and Hjelmslev, they argue that “*to eliminate language’s social context is to eliminate language as being language.*”²⁴ The idea that a language is a self-enclosed, self-identical entity that can be studied in itself, free of external factors and value judgments actually constitutes part of the ecological crisis for Bang and Døør, while a proper dialectical theory of language ought to “contribute to the growth of healthier inter-species societies.”²⁵ In isolating language from its external factors, the discipline can only remain mute regarding ecological destruction and language death. Their dialectical linguistics therefore argues that “philosophy, linguistics and science only achieve their true *raison d’être* when they aim at increasing our understanding of ourselves, our

¹⁸ Venuti 1998 26-7.

¹⁹ Venuti 1998 21

²⁰ Venuti 1998 22

²¹ Venuti 1998 22

²² Harré et al. 1998 139.

²³ Bang and Døør 2007 208.

²⁴ Bang and Døør 2007 48 emphasis in original

²⁵ Bang and Døør 1996 1.

relations to others and our environment, and when these relationships work towards greater democracy, greater ecological sensibility and more peaceful means and goals.”²⁶ Similarly, Mühlhäusler writes that the ‘independency hypothesis of linguistics’²⁷, or the positivist framework through which languages are reified as self-contained isolated objects which can be counted and named, is a reflection of Enlightenment ideals and European political practices,²⁸ and constitutes the greatest problem of linguistics²⁹, as well as a major obstacle to understanding language change and preserving endangered languages. “Far from being an act of objective description, [this approach] can constitute a very serious trespass on the linguistic ecology of an area.”³⁰ For Mühlhäusler, ideological underpinnings thwart whatever claims to neutrality that discourse on the environment may have.³¹ Linguistics therefore ought to sever its atomistic and Cartesian-rooted practice of “thinking the world to bits” if it is to play a positive role in the environmental crisis.³²

Several theorists in environmental ethics have postulated a direct connection between a Cartesian-Newtonian world view and the liberal individualism through which free-market capitalism justifies environmental destruction³³. Similarly, it can be argued that traditional dualisms of Western translation such as fidelity and betrayal, original and translation, and source and target text are complicit with a colonial and imperialistic program as well as the ever-increasing extinction of languages worldwide. As Harmon argues, romantic individualism is anathema to ecological thinking and the valuing of biodiversity. “Ecology teaches us that all things are bound together in overlapping biotic communities- and the Byronic hero is no part of that kind of community”.³⁴ Venuti also writes that the desire for

²⁶ Bang and Døør 2007 44.

²⁷ Mühlhäusler 1996 50.

²⁸ Mühlhäusler 2003 53.

²⁹ Mühlhäusler 2003 199.

³⁰ Mühlhäusler 1996, 3.

³¹ Mühlhäusler 2003, 64.

³² Mühlhäusler 2003 39.

³³ See Plumwood 1993, Mathews 1991 among others

³⁴ Harmon 2002 17

fluency in translation is linked to these very same romantic conceptions of subjectivity and its ideals of liberal humanism and individualism.

“the translator’s invisibility is also partly determined by the individualistic conception of authorship that continues to prevail in Anglo-American culture. According to this conception, the author freely expresses his thoughts and feelings in writing, which is thus viewed as an original and transparent self-representation, unmediated by transindividual determinants (linguistic, cultural, social³⁵) that might complicate authorial originality”.³⁶

The result of this individualism is, for Venuti, a conception of translation and relations with cultural others that is “imperialistic abroad and xenophobic at home”.³⁷ As an alternative, he elaborates on Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of identity as relational; “the nodal point for a multiplicity of practices whose incompatibility or sheer antagonism creates the possibility for change.”³⁸ Cronin follows up on this argument with respect to the translator’s invisibility; “the denial of dependency leads to the fetish of autonomy and an obsessive concern with unconditional freedoms.”³⁹

It is important to note, however, that the individualistic transparency of the translator is not a universal ideal⁴⁰. As Kothari and Wakabayashi argue, bilingual and multilingual cultures are likely more accustomed to experiences of ‘living in translation’; consequently “monolingual cultures are more likely to be aware of translation as a distinct *act*.”⁴¹ The ecological agency of the translator must thus be reconceptualized beyond traditional oppositions of objectivity and subjectivity, description and normativity. This will also allow us to theorize biocultural agency beyond the opposition of activity and passivity, making and letting, which will prove essential to ecological responsibility. As Skutnabb-Kangas writes, we tend to divide the disappearance of languages between language murder, in which a

³⁵ To which we could add ecological.

³⁶ Venuti 1994 6

³⁷ Venuti 1994 17

³⁸ Venuti 1994 304, see also Venuti 1998 29.

³⁹ Cronin 2003 39

⁴⁰ Abel 2005 147.

⁴¹ Kothari and Wakabayashi 2009 13 my emphasis

language is *actively* killed, ‘making a language die’, and language death, in which a language ‘naturally’ lives out its life, *passively* ‘letting a language die’ through ‘unsupported coexistence’.⁴² On the framework of liberal individualism, she writes, only language murder is seen as linguicide. However, she explains, there is nothing ‘natural’ about language death, letting die comes down to making die. Conversely, I will argue that ecological responsibility comes down to a making-and-letting forms of life live-on irreducible to activity and passivity.

The polysystem theory pioneered by Even-Zohar along with the descriptive translation studies of Toury have been the source of some controversy regarding questions of objectivity. Even-Zohar’s idea of a value-neutral study of the norms governing the polysystems through which translated literature gains its acceptability has garnered criticism from Berman, who writes that “in translation, one cannot, one must not be neutral. Neutrality is not the corrective of dogmatism.”⁴³ A science of translation, he argues, if there is to be one, needs to break from its scientific, positivistic and objectivistic roots⁴⁴. However, as Even-Zohar claims, what such criticisms abhor “is not ‘science,’ but some imaginary entity, often deduced from simplified and popularized versions of science.”⁴⁵ Polysystem theory is thus claimed to entail a shift from a positivist collection of data to a study of relations.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Even-Zohar is quick to distinguish his framework of dynamic functionalism from the fixed and static systems of structuralism, within which diachrony or time-succession and systems-external factors are excluded.⁴⁷ Rather, he argues, the polysystem must be understood as a dynamic open system characterized by heterogeneity and complexity. “No ‘objectivist’ program, in the naive sense

⁴² Skutnabb-Kangas 2000 369, 2001 40 0

⁴³ Berman 1995 63

⁴⁴ Berman 1995 63.

⁴⁵ Even-Zohar 1990 4.

⁴⁶ Even-Zohar 1990 9.

⁴⁷ Even-Zohar 1990

of the word, is preached here... the study of cultural norms lies at the very core of any functional stratification theory.”⁴⁸

While some argue that the relativism vis-à-vis norms adopted by Even-Zohar and Toury constitutes a rejection of linguistics-based approaches to translation⁴⁹, and is “critical in decentering translation studies, in moving the field beyond Eurocentric positions”,⁵⁰ it is arguable that a translation produced exclusively according to norms is directly linked to the translator’s invisibility and its complicity with conservative empirical linguistics models, and continues to be mired between the freedom and determinism of classical subjectivity. This apparent impasse provides a good entry point to a performative understanding of translational agency⁵¹ I wish to develop. The point is not to reinstate the visibility and agency of the translator as another heroic romantic author; indeed, Even-Zohar specifically articulates his theory against the romantic freedom of original creation.⁵² Berman seems to concur; a translated text becomes objectified in a polysystemic analysis, and this objectification thus justified since the translation produced according to norms could not have been otherwise⁵³.

The *is* of polysystemic contextuality without the normative *ought* is not what we might call ecologically contextual, and does not provide us with tools to think ‘life lives-on, life ought to live-on’ at the same time.⁵⁴ However, since polysystem theory concerns itself with the idea of systems through time, we can evoke Venuti’s treatment of the diachrony-within-synchrony which makes a dominant language radically heterogeneous to itself; “always a multiplicity of past and present forms,”⁵⁵ thus eradicating the possibility of

⁴⁸ Even-Zohar 1990 13

⁴⁹ Pym 2001 134

⁵⁰ Tymoczko 2006 21

⁵¹ Cronin’s concept of ‘double agency’ and the translator as an ‘agent of metamorphosis’ will be explored in relation to this below.

⁵² “In the Romantic view, ‘creation’ is always ‘free’, and hence ‘original’. Boundness is therefore a negative constraint on freedom: a ‘true creator’ (in literature and any other creative activity) cannot be bound by extant ‘models’”. Even-Zohar 1990 41

⁵³ Berman 1995 63.

⁵⁴ See Holmes Rolston III, quoted in Harmon 2002’s epigraph: “Life flows on. Life ought to flow on”

⁵⁵ Venuti 1998 10,

objectivity in the same blow by which it bestows upon translation the power to engage in “the *creative reproduction* of values.”⁵⁶ In this sense, it is precisely through the reiteration of these norms that the double-agency, or whatever can still be called the interventionist subjectivity of the ecologically-relationally situated participatory translator emerges. While the image of the romantic subject is “at once self-determining and determined by human nature”⁵⁷, the foreignizing translation envisaged by Venuti is “at once dependent on and abusive of domestic values.”⁵⁸ We can thus follow up on Venuti’s suggestion of qualifying empirical approaches such as polysystem theory within a sociohistorical⁵⁹, and now ecological framework to acknowledge that the impossibility of these norms maintaining their self-identity opens the possibility of reorienting, challenging and changing established patterns of hegemony.⁶⁰

As Harré et al. argue, western scientific discourse as it stands is insufficient for understanding the environment⁶¹. Theorists in both translation studies and ecolinguistics have begun to search for alternative models within the more contemporary physics of quantum mechanics and relativity. Citing the work of Halliday and Martin, Mühlhäusler explains that physics in the 20th century has entailed shifts from absolute to relative, object to process, determinism to probability and from stability to flow⁶². As Nouss argues, translation operates in ‘connivance’ with the relativism of contemporary epistemology as outlined by Heisenberg and Bohr⁶³. For Cronin, the quantum duality of wave and particle better represent the translator as a particle both fixed in space and time and traversed by wave-like currents of cultural and linguistic influence. Such an image, he argues, expresses “the necessity for non-

⁵⁶ Venuti 1998 1 emphasis mine. By creative reproduction I understand the impossibility of pure reproduction.

⁵⁷ Venuti 1994 79.

⁵⁸ Venuti 1994 25

⁵⁹ Venuti 1998 29.

⁶⁰ This argument is a reworking of my reading of Derrida and Butler in Lynes 2011a.

⁶¹ Harré et al. 1998 159.

⁶² Mühlhäusler 2003 98.

⁶³ Nouss 2001 284.

reductionist approaches to global hybrids such as translation.”⁶⁴ The shift from the materialism of the Bacon-Descartes-Newton approach towards quantum field networks in the interests of holistic spiritual and ecological democracy is also suggested by Steffensen⁶⁵. As Tymoczko argues, the concept of translation as representation has come to take on a new meaning in this post-positivist era. “Representation... presupposes both a perspective on what is represented and a purpose in the activity itself. In fact, since the decline of positivism, there has been a new awareness of the constructivist aspect of representation, of the fact that representation is not an ‘objective’ process.”⁶⁶ Despite the fact that contemporary physics and philosophy have moved beyond dualism, determinism, individualism and objectivism, these modes of thought continue to present apparently insurmountable barriers to an ecologically sustainable relationship with the earth’s biocultural diversity. Some argue that these concepts are framed by the very structure of Standard Average European languages⁶⁷. Both Bohr and Heisenberg famously expressed their dissatisfaction with the rigidity of scientific language, arguing that “natural language in its everyday spoken form... has precisely the flux and fluidity, the playful quality (i.e. elasticity, with lots of ‘play’ in it), the indeterminacy and the complementarity that the scientists say is required to construe the universe in its post-quantum state”.⁶⁸ Another option would be to learn from other languages and their grammatical constructions of reality. As Steiner notes, Whorf claimed that the grammar of Hopi was better suited to quantum mechanics.

“According to the conception of modern physics, the contrast of particle and field of vibrations is more fundamental in the world of nature than such contrasts as space and time, or past, present and future, which are the sort of contrasts our own language imposes upon us. The Hopi aspect-contrast... being obligatory upon their verb forms, practically forces the Hopi to notice and observe vibratory phenomena, and furthermore encourages them to find names for and to classify such phenomena.”⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Cronin 2006 22.

⁶⁵ Bang and Døør 2007 28.

⁶⁶ Tymoczko 2006 28.

⁶⁷ Halliday 2001

⁶⁸ Halliday 2001 190

⁶⁹ Steiner 1998 94

It is clear that we must reframe the role of translation beyond the objectivist, dualist and mechanistic frameworks of traditional science which characterize neo-liberal individualism and its role in environmental destruction. However, if such patterns of thought are woven into the very grammar of our language, how can we listen and learn from the models of others beyond a colonial dialectic of appropriation? We will attempt to flesh out an answer below.

II: The Translation of Ecology: TEK and Linguistic Constructivism

Mühlhäusler describes the reality-constructivist hypothesis of language as follows: “human beings at best see reality through a number of filters. Of these, language is the most important. Language does not describe reality, but shapes, creates, and perpetuates group-specific perceptions of reality”.⁷⁰ Through its lexicon, metaphors, grammar and discourse, different languages bring different conceptions of sameness and difference into being. Mühlhäusler defines grammar as “the ecological principles which account for the fact that the whole is more than the sum of its parts”.⁷¹ As such, this definition opposes traditional understandings of grammar as the predictable and regular rules of phonology, morphology and syntax. Mühlhäusler draws his inspiration from Halliday, who argues that “grammar, in the sense of the syntax of vocabulary of a natural language, is... a theory of human experience. It is also a principle of social action... In both these functions, or metafunctions, grammar creates the potential within which we act and enact our cultural being”.⁷² Halliday’s theory is obviously linked to the reality-construction view. “Our reality is not something readymade and waiting to be meant – it has to be actively constructed; ... language evolved *in the process of, and as the agency of, its construal*”.⁷³ As Halliday argues, grammar is “at once both enabling and constraining: that is, grammar makes meaning possible, but also sets limits

⁷⁰ Mühlhäusler 2003 60

⁷¹ Mühlhäusler 2003 24

⁷² Halliday 2001 179

⁷³ Halliday 2001 179 my emphasis

on what can be meant”.⁷⁴ In other words, Mühlhäusler writes, the lexicon provides the building blocks of a language, and grammar the instructions as to how these blocks can be arranged and rearranged. It is always possible to use the same material to build different spiritual homes, he argues, but this possibility can only arise from a deep awareness and sensitivity to the nature and constraints of the lexico-grammar of our language if we are to imagine possibilities beyond these. Mühlhäusler and Halliday’s descriptions of the co-implicated possibility and impossibility of going beyond grammar are quite consonant with deconstruction and performativity, as well as emblematic of the contemporary aporetics of translatability we find in translation studies. Making a language foreign to itself by playing with its constraints opens the possibility for it to create new ideas and realities. As we have seen, Mühlhäusler argues that the consequence of a reality-construction hypothesis of language is that languages are not intertranslatable. However, if we ought to seek inspiration from other cultures in the interest of “transform[ing] anthropocentric language and its metaphors of dominance, hierarchy and boundary-drawing”,⁷⁵ how can these insights be conveyed outside of translation? Steiner has approached this very question in *After Babel*, and despite its humanistic aspirations, I feel this work can contribute in an important way to the translation of ecology.

Steiner writes that “different languages are different, inherently creative counter-proposals to the constraints, to the limiting universals of biological and ecological considerations,”⁷⁶ “that is to say in the face of death”.⁷⁷ The homogenizing forces of majority languages and monolingualism are claimed to go hand in hand with Chomsky’s theory of the universal deep structures of transformational generative grammar. The argument he elaborates here is close to Mühlhäusler’s. On the universalist framework, translation is invariably

⁷⁴ Halliday 2001 179

⁷⁵ Mühlhäusler 2003 140

⁷⁶ Steiner 1998 300

⁷⁷ Steiner 1998 xiv

realizable, and merely consists in locating the deep-seated universals underlying the surface dissimilarities of every language. On the extreme monadist framework, translation is impossible. Or rather, “what passes for translation is a convention of approximate analogies, a rough-cast similitude, just tolerable when the two relevant languages or cultures are cognate, but altogether spurious when remote tongues and far-removed sensibilities are in question”.⁷⁸ However, he asks, if the Humboldt-Sapir-Whorf hypothesis correct, how is it that we can and do communicate interlingually? For Steiner, the invention of hypotheticals, counter-factuals and grammars of futurity constitute the origin of language. “*Language is the main instrument of man’s refusal to accept the world as it is*”,⁷⁹ in other words, “to articulate possibilities beyond the treadmill of organic decay and death”.⁸⁰ Given the reality-constructing power of language, “each different language offers its own denial of determinism, ‘the world’, it says ‘can be other’”.⁸¹ In this sense, he argues, “When a language dies, a possible world dies with it”.⁸² Translation can thus be said to represent the organic tension between universal and particular. “In a very specific way, the translator ‘re-experiences’ the evolution of language itself, the ambivalence of the relations between language and world, between ‘languages’ and worlds’. In every translation the creative possibly fictive nature of these relations is tested”.⁸³

While Steiner argues that the creative and inventive functions of language derived from a framework of survival rather than of morality,⁸⁴ it is clear that a concern with imagining our language otherwise, as more consonant and active in shaping a view of the world where relations and interdependencies with all other forms of life are privileged above individual capitalistic gain indeed springs from moral considerations. However, it is also a question of biological survival, since the destruction our patterns of thought continue to wreak

⁷⁸ Steiner 1998 77

⁷⁹ Steiner 1998 228 emphasis in original

⁸⁰ Steiner 1998 238

⁸¹ Steiner 1998 246

⁸² Steiner 1998 xiv

⁸³ Steiner 1998 246

⁸⁴ Steiner 1998 239

on the earth may soon make it quite uninhabitable. If survival and morality are no longer to be opposed in this sense, we can understand humanity as always already potentialized ethically from its first breath of imagining the world otherwise. Indeed, as Harmon quotes William James, “the whole process of life is due to life’s violation of our logical axioms”.⁸⁵ As Mühlhäusler and Halliday argue, the restructuring of an SAE linguistic ecology must occur through processes of borrowing and learning from other languages and cultures. However, Mühlhäusler writes, the introduction of foreign concepts into a new linguistic ecology must be treated with great care if they are to endure in a new environment. As such, a critical examination of the grammatical structures and processes of SAE languages must be undertaken.

Halliday challenges the “nominalizing, metaphorical grammar of late 20th Century prestige varieties of English”⁸⁶ as becoming dysfunctionally “abstract, objectifying and determinate”⁸⁷ and complicit in framing the demands which have exceeded the resources of the earth. He illustrates these problems with the following four examples. 1) English distinguishes between countable and uncountable entities, and “construes *air* and *water* and *soil*, also *coal* and *iron* and *oil* as ‘unbounded’ – that is, as existing without limits”,⁸⁸ which makes it difficult to conceive of these resources as finite. 2) Our grammar arranges quality and quantity together; “the grammar of ‘big’ is the grammar of ‘good’, while the grammar of ‘small’ is the grammar of ‘bad’. The motif of ‘bigger is better’ is [therefore] engraved in our consciousness”.⁸⁹ 3) The transitivity of English grammar organizes human beings “at the most active, agentive pole, with inanimate objects located at the other end. Such things are acted upon but do not act, and they stay where they are until disturbed”.⁹⁰ Such a construct,

⁸⁵ Harmon 2002 138

⁸⁶ Halliday 2001 191

⁸⁷ Halliday 2001 191

⁸⁸ Halliday 2001 194

⁸⁹ Halliday 2001 194

⁹⁰ Halliday 2001 194

Halliday argues, “makes it hard for us to take seriously the notion of inanimate nature as an active participant in events”.⁹¹ 4) Our grammar introduces a sharp dichotomy between conscious and unconscious entities which is manifested in our pronoun system. “Conscious things are *he/she* while unconscious things are *it*”.⁹² This imposes a strict disjunction between us and other living beings, most notably for Halliday our relation to Gaia, “the earth itself as a living being”.⁹³

Moreover, SAE grammar has constructed a reality that is “fixed and determinate, in which objects predominate and processes serve merely to classify them”.⁹⁴ Such a process is realized through an ideational grammatical metaphor, such as the nominalization of processes into objectified entities. “A nominalized form represents qualities and processes as ‘abstracted’ from things and time respectively”.⁹⁵ One need only consider the reification processes through which ecologically and relationally situated systems of transmission are objectified into ‘language’, or the processes of factories churning out greenhouse gases reified into ‘pollution’, of which quotas can then be bought and sold.⁹⁶ Mühlhäusler is also critical of the patterns of marking in SAE languages. An example of anthropocentrism in English would be the unmarked status of ‘humans and animals’ contrasted with the marked ‘animals and humans’. Similarly, control and ownership by individuals over objects is unmarked in English, in opposition to the passive construction. In other words, the marked construction sticks out as awkward and interrupts the fluency of our reading patterns. Indeed, as Halliday writes, the at once constraining and liberating role of grammar can serve to reverse our established conceptions of linguistic marking: “redefining *growth* as *failure to shrink*” is an example of this process.

⁹¹ Halliday 2001 195. Also on this, see Lynes 2012

⁹² Halliday 2001 195

⁹³ Halliday 2001 195

⁹⁴ Halliday and Martin, quoted in Goatly 2001 204

⁹⁵ Goatly 2001 218

⁹⁶ See Harré et al. 1998

However, the most important feature of linguistic structure regarding the environmental crisis is the ways in which different languages encode temporal dimensions. Harré et al. write that temporal concerns are not one topic among others in this question, but are “woven into the very fabric of environmental discourse”.⁹⁷ As Steiner argues, “our views of time are mainly generated by the grammar of the verb... different cultures operate with and within different conceptualizations or, at the very least, different images of time”.⁹⁸ The Western understanding of the three-dimensional, past-present-future, arrow metaphor of time is “set out and organized by the Indo-European verb system”.⁹⁹ Chawla claims that the three-dimensional conception of time “encourages a world view in which existence is perceived as fragmented rather than as holistically or relativistically interrelated”.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, the linear conception of time prevents adequate considerations of futurity, and is thus responsible for the wasteful here-and-now attitude of capitalist consumerism. In contrast, Wiener points to time systems which uphold a ‘neutral or zero time preference’, “meaning that a moose in the future (or a good run of salmon) does not have lower value than a moose in the present. This is very important. A neutral or negative time preference expresses long-term values, and makes decisions different from the short-term preference for the present”.¹⁰¹ While SAE languages objectify and abstract nouns from subjective experience, Chawla writes that “Amerindians perceive time in a two-tense system, earlier and later, a perception that is closer to the subjective feeling of duration as it is experienced”.¹⁰² In other words, certain temporal constructions are embodied within the cyclical and rhythmical processes of nature. However, Mühlhäusler notes, “the desire to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature is contradicted

⁹⁷ Harré et al 1998 119

⁹⁸ Steiner 1998 137

⁹⁹ Steiner 1998 137

¹⁰⁰ Chawla 2001 117

¹⁰¹ Wiener 1999 521

¹⁰² Chawla 2001 117

by a control-ful way of speaking”.¹⁰³ Could an embodied, rhythmically oriented translation thus serve to signal these contradictions in majority languages?

Steiner points to an interesting difference between the Indo-European and Semitic constructions of temporality. “In Indo-European tongues, ‘the future is preponderantly thought to life before us, while in Hebrew future events are always expressed as coming after us’”.¹⁰⁴ As he explains, this image of time coheres with the concepts of present absence and self-erasure in deconstruction, “itself a variant on Talmudic-Kabbalistic speech speculations”.¹⁰⁵ Given Benjamin’s unquestionable influence on Derrida, the following two readings can help us develop our concept of rhythmical translation in greater detail. In her attempt to present Sanskrit translations outside the traditional oppositions of original and translation, Merrill draws from Benjamin’s concept of afterlife as follows. “Examining the temporal constitutions of [these] narratives - beyond living to dead, past to present, plural to singular – allows us to think of these loops of rhythmic interpretation as cyclical rather than linear”.¹⁰⁶ In this sense, she writes, we can conceive of translation as a kind of ‘justice across future births’. The concept of translation as an originary rebirth across repeating cycles of time might allow us to reconceptualize our own established frameworks of temporality and intergenerational justice. As Weber also notes regarding Benjamin, “as something that neither ‘comes to be’ nor ‘passes away’... the origin is an *event* involving both singularity and repetition... What [this] entails is less a self-contained phenomenon than a complex *relationship* that is described as a ‘rhythm’, thus emphasizing both its repetitive and temporal aspect”.¹⁰⁷ This originary rhythm, Weber writes, is implicit in Benjamin’s understanding of translation. In what follows, I will argue that a rhythmically oriented theory of translation working to mimic the cycles of nature can put us in a better place to listen to the lessons of

¹⁰³ Mühlhäusler 2003 134

¹⁰⁴ Steiner 1998 165

¹⁰⁵ Steiner 1998 166

¹⁰⁶ Merrill 2009 68-7

¹⁰⁷ Weber 2005 73

traditional ecological knowledge in such a way that resists objectification and appropriation, emphasizing instead mutual respect and cooperation.

It is essential to clarify that no theorist working on these issues partakes in an uncritical valorization of indigenous cultures and knowledge systems. Indeed, such a naïve and romantic view of the ‘noble savage’ is rejected across the board as culturally imperialistic.¹⁰⁸ Mühlhäusler adds that the knowledge contained in these languages is not “necessarily better or more conducive to the long-term survival of humans than SAE languages”,¹⁰⁹ but that a diversity of perspectives ought to be valued in itself. “It is useful to have a number of different maps, a number of conceptual systems to serve as a corrective against particular assumptions about the world”.¹¹⁰ As Posey notes, around 300 million people, who speak 4 to 5000 of the earth’s 6000 languages can be said to be indigenous. For Posey, many indigenous languages internally embody a concept of sustainability and an ethic of conservation through a long period of adapting their language to a particular ecosystem. As Harmon argues, traditional ecological knowledge stands in total opposition to the dualism of western science, and has “almost completely internalized the evolutionary give-and-take between nature and culture”.¹¹¹ In this sense, Posey writes, “concepts of biodiversity and conservation are... alien to indigenous peoples. This does not mean that they do not respect and foster living things, but rather that nature is an extension of society. Thus biodiversity is not an *object* to be conserved”.¹¹² Maffi elaborates on this argument as follows;

“there is a tendency among indigenous peoples towards a holistic, non-individualist approach to the cultural as well as the natural world; a tendency to think not just in terms of parts or components, but in terms of a whole and of the relationships among the elements of the whole – in other words, to think ecologically in both nature and culture”.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ See Smith 2001 103, Zent 2001 181, Mühlhäusler 2003 140, Harré et al. 137, Posey 1999 7

¹⁰⁹ Mühlhäusler 1996 310

¹¹⁰ Mühlhäusler 1996 310

¹¹¹ Harmon 2002 91

¹¹² Posey 1999 7

¹¹³ Maffi 2001 361

However, Maffi is quite clear that “local knowledge does not easily ‘translate’ into the majority languages to which minority language speakers switch”.¹¹⁴ In fact, dominant ethnocentric and individualistic conceptions of translation pose several problems to an ethical translation of TEK. As Maffi notes, TEK is usually the result of a communal process of creation. As such, “the moment and locus of emergence of the idea or *original* work cannot be identified”.¹¹⁵ Moreover, the sacred and secret nature of some traditional knowledge “does not fit well with Western notions of a ‘free-for-all- public domain’”.¹¹⁶ Indeed, Brush is critical of the possessive individualism of the ‘bioprospecting’ of traditional knowledge in Western circles, and such a framework coheres with traditional understandings of the relationship between authorship and translation. “The essentialist’s conception of author springs from the doctrine of ‘possessive individualism’ and embraces the ‘hero inventor’ quality of authorship”.¹¹⁷ Therefore, the frameworks of copyright law are as ineffective in the compensation of TEK as they are for translations.¹¹⁸ For Brush, it is clear that the preservation of species and languages ought to be approached outside of these appropriative frameworks. Certainly, Wollock writes, the main goal is not to “translate all this diversity into the one global language of science and international commerce for the benefit of those who control it”.¹¹⁹ However, is it not precisely against the systems of global capitalism and environmental destruction that it is of the utmost importance to translate this knowledge into our belief systems? How, Slikkerveer asks, is indigenous knowledge to be “understood, respected and synthesized with global knowledge in a balanced, humane way”?¹²⁰

As Posey argues, our ultimate goal should be to “harness the totality, rather than the components, of TEK systems in sustainability strategies, so that the quality of indigenous

¹¹⁴ Maffi 1999 30

¹¹⁵ Maffi 2001 415

¹¹⁶ Maffi 2001 415

¹¹⁷ Brush 2001 526

¹¹⁸ See Venuti 1998 47-66.

¹¹⁹ Wollock 2001 253

¹²⁰ Slikkerveer 1999 169

management can benefit the wider society”.¹²¹ Indeed, Harré et al. warn that it is problematic to selectively ransack particular insights from traditional knowledge systems. Since linguistic concepts develop over a long period of interaction with their environment, Mühlhäusler cautions that borrowing from the vast pool of knowledge cannot consist of the simple transfer and addition of single elements, but must constitute “the reconstruction of a linguistic ecology”.¹²² As Maffi adds, the real task is thus that “indigenous heritage be protected as *bodies* – bodies of knowledge, bodies of folklore, bodies of language – and as *living*, constantly developing bodies, not as dead bodies from the past”.¹²³ In this sense, she writes, “only case-by-case examination – within the framework of an evolved, hybrid, integrated flexible system for the protection of indigenous peoples’ rights – may lead to an appropriate solution”.¹²⁴ It is precisely this contextually situated, relationally embodied and performative approach that I envision as the work of ecosystemic translation. We will now attempt to further flesh this out.

*III: The Ecology of Translation: From Restricted to General Ecologies of Translation;
Conditions of Life or Individual Rights?*

Insofar as translation studies and ecolinguistics have recognized the need to shift from an objective study of fixed, static, discrete individual entities to a participatory intervention within fields of relations, processes, networks, open systems with emergent, conflictual and contradictory properties, we can understand that the protection of biocultural diversity must arise from an obligation to sustaining the ecological support systems through which forms of life emerge. However, more needs to be said about what constitutes such conditions of life for species and languages, and what kinds of obligations we ought to have towards them.

Harmon argues that the destruction of biological and cultural diversity represents the destruction of “the fundamental processes that generated the conditions of life that we (‘we’

¹²¹ Posey 2001 385

¹²² Mühlhäusler 2003 145

¹²³ Maffi 2001 421 emphasis in original

¹²⁴ Maffi 2001 424

meaning all species) are at home in.”¹²⁵ These conditions of life are what he understands as the biocultural presence; “nothing less than the entire complement of biological and cultural diversity now existing, bestowed upon the Earth by millions of years of evolution.”¹²⁶ As we have seen, our ethical stance towards preserving this biocultural presence is best directed at the formative processes of ecosystemic speciation, and our interventions, Harmon suggests, would do well to “mimic these patterns in nature.”¹²⁷ For Bang and Døør, an ecological point of view necessitates an attempt to understand other cultures and species¹²⁸, and this understanding can be expressed through translation. As we shall see, however, to do so involves an apprehension of the conflictual and contradictory dynamics through which ecosystems flourish. Steffensen points out that the goal is not to stand outside a conflictual structure, but to emphasize a notion of “impermanent harmony in conflict”.¹²⁹ Embracing diversity for Harmon thus necessitates an appreciation of conflicting values and the recognition that “competing moral assertions (including absolutist ones) are part of a larger ethical landscape whose overall diversity should be preserved”.¹³⁰ Indeed, the notion of translation as cultural understanding and communication has been displaced towards one of a negotiation of differences and transmission. An important link between translation and ecology is hinted at in Zeller Mayer, who founds his concept of translation on Bateson’s¹³¹ theory of metacommunication; “the condition for a successful relationship between... interactants is not their similarity but the mutual recognition of difference”.¹³² Capra summarizes this argument elegantly; “ecological literacy includes that both sides of a conflict

¹²⁵ Harmon 2002 72.

¹²⁶ Harmon 2002 72

¹²⁷ Harmon 2002 161

¹²⁸ Bang and Døør 2007 72.

¹²⁹ Steffensen 2007 27

¹³⁰ Harmon 2002 155

¹³¹ Author of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972) and *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (1979)

¹³² Zeller Mayer 1998 78.

can be important, depending on the context, and the contradictions within a community are signs of its diversity and vitality, and thus contribute to the system's viability".¹³³

We are now in a good position to elaborate Cronin's concept of translation ecology; "a translation practice that gives control to speakers and translators of minority languages of what, when and – perhaps more urgently... how texts might be translated in and out of their languages".¹³⁴ As he argues, one of the ends of restoring agency to the translator as transmissive rather than communicative is "the contribution of translation to genuine biocultural diversity on the planet".¹³⁵ He explains that translation relationships need to be constantly reassessed, since the conflictual and asymmetrical dynamics of hegemony between languages are in constant state of flux. "Moving away from foundational notions of translation, it will be in a conception of translation as 'a world of continued relational adjustments' that minority languages will finally have a major role to play in the discipline of translation studies".¹³⁶ Communities attempting to preserve minority languages find themselves in a double bind regarding translation. Cronin argues that Venuti's ethical framework of foreignizing or minoritizing translation can in fact be counterproductive in translating from a major language; revealing the self-heterogeneity of a minority language can in place it a greater danger of extinction. "A domesticating strategy which is perceived as regressive, ethnocentric and appropriative in the case of a major language does not necessarily carry the same meanings for a minority languages. In the context of minority-language[s], naturalizing strategies can indeed preserve rather than endanger the planet's linguistic ecosystem".¹³⁷

In other words, the need for a certain restricted economy of closure and reappropriation must be taken account in relation to the general economy of translation

¹³³ Capra 1999 492

¹³⁴ Cronin 2003 167

¹³⁵ Cronin 2003 4

¹³⁶ Cronin 2003 156.

¹³⁷ Cronin 2003 162

ecology¹³⁸. Ecology and economy are said to be inseparable in such considerations. “The fact that both words contain the root ‘*oikos*’ *house* is already suggestive of the need of both economists and ecologists to be good housekeepers who have to keep in order their house to guarantee the survival of its inhabitants”.¹³⁹ “A linguistic ecology without a linguistic economy is not possible”¹⁴⁰, writes Denison. As Weinreich argues, “ecology... does not invalidate economy”, but rather “builds on economic thinking a number of neglected parameters and by viewing reality not with totally different eyes, but with more long-term vision, caution and consideration than is common in economic thinking”.¹⁴¹ For Weinreich, future perspectives represent the very point at which “ecological thinking diverges from economic thinking”.¹⁴² As we saw with polysystem theory, it is precisely the introduction of time and diachrony into systemic considerations which shifts analysis from objects to processes, and thus the conditions of life for languages. However, even if we conceive of the preservation of biocultural diversity as an obligation to future generations, is also essential that a general translation ecology contextually and strategically provides for a restricted, static and economic conception, even objectification of language where the conditions of life cannot be met, notably in situations of extreme asymmetry where translation from major to minor languages threatens the survival of the latter. In other words, a study of language-in-its-environment can necessitate the deployment of a fictional or metaphorical ‘language-in-itself’. In the case of protecting biodiversity, we could explain the relation between restricted and general economy as the conservationist conception of protecting entities outside ourselves as the former (*ex-situ*), and the latter as an embodied, hybridized and relational conception where ecosystemic sustainability is woven into the fabric of our daily lives (*in-situ*). An apprehension of the economy-within-ecology of the minor language in question is thus

¹³⁸ See Derrida’s “From Restricted to General Economy”

¹³⁹ Weinreich 2001 94

¹⁴⁰ Denison 2001 78

¹⁴¹ Weinreich 2001 94

¹⁴² Weinreich 2001 97

paramount in Cronin's translation ecology, which "attaches due importance to particularism and place without a reactionary retreat to ethnocentric smugness".¹⁴³ It is through this awareness that Cronin explains the network as a new paradigm of translation.

"A network is by definition open ended and therefore capable of being extended indefinitely... as a result, new elements can lead to restructuring without collapse. Secondly... the potential openness of the network does not mean it is open to all... Thirdly, the logic of the network is greater than the power of its individual nodes... In other words, the connectedness of nodes is what permits their flexible and dynamic response to changing situations but it is shared goals, values and ends which allow for a level of structural coherence in the network itself".¹⁴⁴

Countless papers in environmental ethics and translation studies have become mired in a difficult debate on striking the right balance between universalism and particularism. As we have seen, the language of individual human rights evolved from political philosophies of traditional liberalism, and can be closely correlated with the attitude that individual species and languages ought to be protected rather than the ecological processes which bring these about. However, as Nash argues, a comprehensive ethic of bioresponsibility involves a consideration of both individualistic and holistic poles, of both individual life-forms and ecosystemic wholes as complementary.¹⁴⁵ Skutnabb-Kangas presents an account of rights which does not fit neatly in the universal/particular care/rights binaries. As she argues linguistic human rights, especially in education, "play a decisive role in maintaining and revitalizing languages and in supporting linguistic and cultural diversity and through them, also biological diversity on earth".¹⁴⁶ Human rights ought to be understood as the rights of future generations to biocultural diversity.¹⁴⁷ While most human rights are framed in terms of individual persons,¹⁴⁸ she claims, linguistic human rights are also collective, and as such constitute "essential tools through which minorities can get access to those rights majorities

¹⁴³ Cronin 2003 6

¹⁴⁴ Cronin 2003 45

¹⁴⁵ Nash 1999 472

¹⁴⁶ Skutnabb-Kangas 2001 399

¹⁴⁷ Skutnabb-Kangas 2000 655

¹⁴⁸ Skutnabb-Kangas 2000 483

are granted through individual rights”.¹⁴⁹ She thus claims that the UN’s focus on individual rights has been to the detriment of minority groups and has contributed to the invisibility of the plight of endangered languages.¹⁵⁰ However, Skutnabb-Kangas argues that human rights become completely insufficient in the face of asymmetrical power relations. “Human rights approaches are naïve if they disregard power relations – and many of them do. Some of them are themselves well on their way to rather becoming part of the oppressive system rather than a solution... Linguistic human rights arguments are true and beautiful, but futile in a negotiated situation of unequal power”.¹⁵¹ On a similar note, Maffi wonders whether the Western discourse of rights is truly the best option in the preservation of biocultural diversity, rather than in terms of “obligations of the human community to earth and the other species on it”.¹⁵² Bang and Door, in a move closely resembling Gilligan’s concept of the different voice, oppose what they call the rights universe of discourse, framed in terms of ‘right-duty-obligation-justice’, to what they call the love discourse, characterized by “love, peace, wisdom, compassion, friendship, co-joy, sharing, caring and mental harmony”.¹⁵³ This account brings us to an extremely important distinction in their work; “instead of the concept of ‘vital needs’ we can work with a distinction between *vital needs* which concern survival, and *essential needs* which are about living and blossoming”.¹⁵⁴ Indeed, it seems drawing the distinction might not be as important as insisting on a relation of co-implication between the two; considerations of preserving linguistic and biological diversity ought wherever possible to be concerned with a loving provision of the conditions for forms of life to live, flourish and blossom. Where the political asymmetries are such that providing these conditions, however

¹⁴⁹ Skutnabb-Kangas 2000 483

¹⁵⁰ Skutnabb-Kangas 2000 509

¹⁵¹ Skutnabb-Kangas 2000 665-666

¹⁵² Maffi 2001 428

¹⁵³ Bang and Døør 2007 176

¹⁵⁴ Bang and Døør 2007 177

well intentioned, is impossible, attention must be directed to an urgent life-or-death battle for the survival of the form of life in question.

*III: Ecosystemic Translation as Foreignization of the Human Geschlecht: Rhythms
and Embodiments of Biocultural Diversity*

Throughout our analyses thus far, we have obviously been operating with the Derridean insight that translation is both necessary and impossible. However, a more accurate representation of this syntagm would be to say that translation as reproduction is impossible. Indeed, admitting the very factor of diachrony and temporality into these questions separates the purity of repetition from itself. As Lianeri points out, absolute translatability comes down to nontranslation.¹⁵⁵ While translations have repeatedly been accused of the destruction, distortion and betrayal of the origin, these processes ought rather to be understood as “the creative destruction of invention and renewal”, since “[t]ranslation without change is not translation but mere citation”.¹⁵⁶ As Harré et al. note, the rejection of total effability between languages does not entail their absolute impenetrability. “Finding a form to render an exotic ‘take’ on the world is both the problem and art of translation”.¹⁵⁷ In fact, Cronin argues, translation only succeeds as transformation in its failure; “the incompleteness of any translation is the very principle of its future creativity”.¹⁵⁸ Not only does the conflictual structure of translation necessarily engage it in the transformation of established modes of thought, Eaglestone’s reading of Levinas posits the translational aporia as the very condition of ethics. “It is only by approaching the neighbour, the other, as that which we cannot understand or comprehend, or translate, that we act ethically”.¹⁵⁹ In other words, the incompleteness and open-endedness of translation is precisely what opens up the possibility for an unending and self-renewing ethical responsibility to Earth others. For Meschonnic,

¹⁵⁵ Lianeri 2006 77

¹⁵⁶ Cronin 2003 38

¹⁵⁷ Harré et al. 1998 138

¹⁵⁸ Cronin 2003 131

¹⁵⁹ Eaglestone 2005 136

however, the problem of untranslatability is simply the result of a flawed theory of language that remains within the binary of the sign, rather than as interaction or *Wechselwirkung*¹⁶⁰. In other words, it is precisely by recognizing the relational, or shall we say ecosystemic character of language that we can move beyond the standard debates between original and translation, fidelity and betrayal in Western conceptions of translation towards the life-and-death issue of making and letting biocultural diversity live-on more and better, by challenging the liberal humanism embedded in these classical oppositions.

As Berman writes, translation as it is generally practiced is culturally ethnocentric and literarily hypertextual. The ethnocentrism of translation is familiar grounds for us; that which seeks to “return everything to its own culture, to its norms and values, and considers what lies outside of these – the foreign – as negative, or simply good enough to be annexed, adapted, to increase the richness of this culture”.¹⁶¹ Such an account is clearly consonant with the free-market capitalist underpinnings of bioprospecting in TEK; of appropriating knowledge to further maintain its structures of domination. Hypertextual translation is the expression Berman uses to refer to the opposition between original and translation. “The hypertextual relation is that which links a text x with an anterior text y”.¹⁶² Most interesting for our investigation, however, is the relation Berman postulates between ethnocentric and hypertextual translation; “*ethnocentric translation is necessarily hypertextual, and hypertextual translation necessarily ethnocentric*”.¹⁶³ Indeed, it appears to be precisely because much TEK cannot be traced back to a single origin that ethnocentric practices of appropriation can occur without proper compensation to its indigenous owners. In other words, if a system of knowledge lacks an origin, a heroic inventor, it is always already devalued as secondary and post-lapsarian; an inferior copy of an irrecoverable, glorious origin

¹⁶⁰ Compare with Alwin Fill above.

¹⁶¹ Berman 1999 29

¹⁶² Berman 1999 36

¹⁶³ Berman 1999 30 emphasis in original

for the liberal-humanist-individualist-romantic framework. As Maffi points out, the oral character and communal creation of much TEK is what allows it to maintain itself as a living process, as “holistic, inherently dynamic, consistently evolving through experimentation and innovation, fresh insight and external stimuli”.¹⁶⁴ For Merrill, Orientalist claims to a timeless, unrecoverable pre-lapsarian origin ought to be redirected precisely towards such an understanding of traditional knowledge systems as “part of a more dynamically constructed present”.¹⁶⁵ In oral cultures, Cronin explains, “material is constantly modified as part of the dynamic relationships between the tellers of tales and their audiences”.¹⁶⁶ It is in this sense that Maffi evokes the necessity of protecting a right to orality if traditional ecological knowledge is to be preserved as a process and as a living body. What translators ignore and Saussure recognized so long ago, Meschonnic writes, is that the origin *is* its functioning.¹⁶⁷ When Haugen adapted Humboldt’s terms in claiming that language is both *ergon* (product) and *enérgeia* (activity), “it appears as action, but exists in the end as potential”¹⁶⁸ in the first paper on the ecology of language, it is not entirely unlikely this is what he had in mind. As Meschonnic writes, translation must involve the de-metaphorization of the survival of the work; “that is to say *activity*, opposed to *product*. In the terms of Humboldt *energeia*, and not *ergon*”.¹⁶⁹ However, it is precisely by conceiving of the origin as the activity of its own self-heterogeneous production that we can approach translation and the preservation of traditional ecological knowledge as the metamorphosis of a living body.

For Berman, a logic of the same has always hijacked the true aim of translation, which involves the ethical act of welcoming the other as other. However, Venuti argues that

“[there is a] violence that resides in the very activity of translation: the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs and representations that pre-exist

¹⁶⁴ Posey 2001 382

¹⁶⁵ Merrill 2006 82

¹⁶⁶ Cronin 2003 25

¹⁶⁷ Meschonnic 2007 125

¹⁶⁸ Haugen 1972 327

¹⁶⁹ Meschonnic 2007 105

it in the target language, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality... The aim of translation is to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar, and this aim always risks a wholesale domination of the foreign text".¹⁷⁰

For Venuti, translation can never rid itself of this fundamental ethnocentrism. However, it can limit its violence through the work of foreignization. Foreignizing or minoritizing translation operates through the concept of the remainder, the variables of non-standard forms of a language that challenge its hegemony as a self-identical entity. "Foreignizing translation signifies the difference of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language. In its effort to do right abroad, this translation method must do wrong at home, deviating enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience".¹⁷¹ Since, as he notes, English is by far the language the most translated from and yet very little into, foreignizing translation into English can serve to challenge "ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism", to which we could also add the individualism, humanism and anthropocentrism responsible for ecological destruction. Venuti indeed argues the following:

"foreignization assumes a concept of subjectivity very different from the humanist assumptions underlying domestication. Neither the foreign writer nor the translator is conceived as the transcendental origin of the text... Rather, subjectivity is constituted by cultural and social determinants that are diverse and even conflicting, that mediate any language use, and that vary with every cultural formatting and every historical moment".

In other words, foreignization allows us to apprehend subjectivity, if it can still be called such, as originally dependent on the ecosystemic conditions of its emergence. Merrill offers an insightful citation of Nancy on this question; " We do not gain access to the origin: access is refused by the origin's concealing itself in its multiplicity... we do not identify ourselves in it or as it, but *with* it, in a sense that must be elucidated here and is nothing other than the

¹⁷⁰ Venuti 1994 18

¹⁷¹ Venuti 1994 20

meaning of originary coexistence”.¹⁷² In this sense, is there an opening through which ecosystemic translation can operate to signal the foreignness of the human from itself and challenge the anthropocentric frameworks through which humanity imagines itself outside of a nature it is free to control and exploit? More speculatively, if a foreignizing translation into English can work in the interest of protecting minority languages and cultures, and cultural diversity and biodiversity are inextricably linked, can it thus serve also to foreignize the human *geschlecht*?¹⁷³ Even stranger still, given Cronin’s insight that “in any meaningful translation ecology, translation cannot be unidirectional”, what might it mean for minority life forms to domesticate and naturalize us in their translations of our humanity?

Steiner argues that essential to any understanding of translation is the realization that “a text may conceal more than it conveys”.¹⁷⁴ Language, he writes, is obviously used to communicate, “but also to conceal, to leave unspoken”.¹⁷⁵ Through his reading of Benjamin, he notes that “those who ‘understand’ a text have largely missed its essential significance. Bad translations communicate too much. Their seeming accuracy is linked to what is non-essential in the fabric of the original”.¹⁷⁶ As we have seen, Steiner claims that the origin of human language does not lie in the communication of information and facts. Rather, “the potentials of fiction, of counterfactuality, of undecidable futurity profoundly characterize both the origin and nature of speech. They differentiate it ontologically from the many signal systems available to the animal world”.¹⁷⁷ Steiner’s humanism,¹⁷⁸ however, can be played against him in this analysis. If we conceive of the origin of language as its own self-erasure in iterative silence, the secret as the first word, we are in a better position to understand the sacred in secrecy in traditional ecological knowledge. Here, I refer to Meschonnic’s definition

¹⁷² Jean-Luc Nancy, in Merrill 2006 216

¹⁷³ As Derrida points out, the untranslatable “*word* for sex, race, family, generation, lineage, species, genre”. Derrida 2008 7

¹⁷⁴ Steiner 1998 64

¹⁷⁵ Steiner 1998 47

¹⁷⁶ Steiner 1998 66

¹⁷⁷ Steiner 1998 497

¹⁷⁸ “the last of the humanists”, says Nouss 2001 286

of the sacred, “the fusing interdependency [*fusionnel*] between the human and the cosmic, including the animal... the sacred is anterior to human language”.¹⁷⁹ As we saw in Weber’s reading of Benjamin, “‘translation’ is already at work in the ‘rhythm’ of the original, insofar as it is historical”.¹⁸⁰ However, is the incompleteness of originary repetition which renders it historical, but thus always already in a process of alternation and transformation. Therefore, Weber observes, translation ought to be understood as translatability in Benjamin; the ever-renewing potentiality of the living-on of the work. Translatability must thus be expressed as a relational concept. “And relations, Benjamin warns, should not necessarily be judged in exclusively *human* terms, *such as the needs of human beings to understand works written in a foreign language*”.¹⁸¹ In other words, it could be that the origin’s self effacement in rhythmical multiplicity reflects precisely the cyclical temporality of ecosystemic relationality out of which humanity spoke the breath of its first secret. Eaglestone has a similar argument in his reading of Levinas; “it is precisely untranslatability, the otherness, of another language that makes it important. Levinas writes that ‘the other is a neighbour... before being an individual of the genus man’... and again that the ‘unity of the human race is in fact posterior to fraternity’...where fraternity means the unmediated relation with the other”.¹⁸² In this sense, an ethics of earth literacy may consist in staging an alien reading experience into our understanding of humanity as self-identical, as somehow separate from its own ecological conditions of possibility. If we translate the relationally embodied rhythms and ecologically embedded insights of traditional knowledge into our dominant conceptual schemes in such a way as to disrupt their hegemonic power, is it possible to sufficiently foreignize humanity within itself to ensure the continued processes of biocultural speciation? What might such a metamorphosis of the human *geschlecht* entail?

¹⁷⁹ Meschonnic 2007 123

¹⁸⁰ Weber 2005 74

¹⁸¹ Weber 2005 74 emphasis mine

¹⁸² Eaglestone 2005 136

In the foreword to a recent anthology on non-Western concepts of translation, Devy writes that “if the earth is to be saved from the ecological ravishment that it has been repeatedly encountering all over, words, texts and cultures must return to nomadism, must get translated for ever”.¹⁸³ Berman presents the concept of trans-lation (as opposed to ‘traduction’ in French) as the passage between one language-culture and another. A study of trans-lational spaces, he argues would have to rest on “a *history of migrations*, and a ‘theory’ of the human being as *migrant-being* (migration is the foundation of translation) and, furthermore, *mutant-being* (all migration is mutation)”.¹⁸⁴ Cronin’s concept of the translator as an agent of metamorphosis is instructive here. As he argues, now that we accept a relational semantics, or reality-constructivist view of language, translation can allow us to construct and experience reality differently. In this process, the translator also becomes metamorphosized. Since metaphors enter into relation “the like and unlike the bringing together of the alien and the domestic, then it seems similarly true that translation is primarily a metaphorical operation and that all metaphor is fundamentally a translational operation”.¹⁸⁵ Cronin then adds the following quote: “metamorphosis is the principle of organic vitality as well as the pulse in the body of art”.¹⁸⁶ This invocation of the pulse allows us to turn to Meschonnic’s conception of rhythm; “when language transforms life and life transforms language”.¹⁸⁷ For Meschonnic, rhythm implies the continuum between body and language in the writing of the poem, and the translation of the poem as another writing; another organization of the movement of speech within language. As such, he writes, the task of translation is to “leave the poem active by making of it an act of life”,¹⁸⁸ through an act of rhythm as opening rather than conclusion.

¹⁸³ Devy 2009 xi

¹⁸⁴ Berman 1995 56 emphasis in original

¹⁸⁵ Cronin 2006 105

¹⁸⁶ Marina Warner, quoted in Cronin 2006 105

¹⁸⁷ Meschonnic 2007 165

¹⁸⁸ Meschonnic 2007 35

Berman points out that translation signifies “not only the interlingual ‘passage of a text, but – around this first ‘passage’ a whole other series of ‘passages’ which concern the act of writing and, more secretly yet, the act of living and dying”.¹⁸⁹ It is the secrecy and mystery of this act that interests me more than anything in translation, and Spivak’s remarks are equally instructive here. As she argues, all languages are differently founded within a three-tiered framework of silence, rhetoric and logic. For Spivak, rhetoric represents the disruption of logical systematicity of language as the production of an ethical agent. This disruption, she writes, “indicate[s] the founding violence of the silence at work within rhetoric”.¹⁹⁰ The task of the translator is thus “to surrender herself to the linguistic rhetoric of the original text”,¹⁹¹ to “solicit the text to show the limits of its language, because that rhetorical aspect will point at the silence of the absolute fraying of language that the text wards off, in its special manner”.¹⁹² Therefore, her analysis of translating agents of withholding allows us to articulate the contingencies of ecosystemic translation in more detail. In transmitting a story not meant to be translated or passed on¹⁹³, the story bears the mark of untranslatability within itself; necessary and impossible crossing of the aporia of translatability. “And the lesson is the (im)possibility of translation in the general sense. Rhetoric points at absolute contingency, not the sequentiality of time, not even the cycle of seasons, but only ‘weather’”.¹⁹⁴ This account of contingency thus allows Spivak to align herself with the work of Wilson Harris, who “hails the (re)birth of the native imagination as not merely the trans-lation but the trans-substantiation of the species”.¹⁹⁵ In other words, she writes, attending to the rhetoric and

¹⁸⁹ Berman 1999 21

¹⁹⁰ Spivak 1993 181

¹⁹¹ Spivak 1993 189

¹⁹² Spivak 1993 183

¹⁹³ Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

¹⁹⁴ Spivak 1993 196

¹⁹⁵ Spivak 1993 196

withholding in these accounts allows us to understand the translation of ‘weather’ “into an oceanic version of quantum physics”.¹⁹⁶

In this metamorphosis of the human *geschlecht*, arrived at through listening to the originary rhythms of embodied languaging, we can finally turn to Berman once again. Translation, he writes, is always the translation of the letter of the text. Ethical translation consists of more than simply communicating the foreign; it must manifest it as a manifestation, since in a language, in a form of life, and “in a work, it is the ‘world’ which, each time in a different way, is manifested in its totality”.¹⁹⁷ Both the other and the work, Berman argues, are carnal beings and realities. In fact, he writes, it is the very corporeality of the work which “makes it living and capable of survival”.¹⁹⁸ As he explains, “the ethical aim of translation, precisely because it proposes to welcome the other in its carnal corporeality, can only attach itself to the letter of the work”.¹⁹⁹ In fact, this brings us to an interesting translation choice in Derrida’s work. In “Freud and the Scene of Writing”, the French reads the following; “un *corps* verbal ne se laisse pas traduire ou transporter dans une autre langue”.²⁰⁰ In English, however, ‘corps’ is translated as ‘materiality’. “To relinquish materiality: such that the driving force of translation. And when that materiality is reinstated, translation becomes poetry”.²⁰¹ To reinstate the materiality of the letter is thus to reinstate translation as a body that matters; a poem as the “transformation of a form of life by a form of language and the transformation of a form of language by a form of life”.²⁰² Therefore, it is precisely as the body offers itself up to translation that it opens itself up to metamorphosis. Indeed, translating embodied practices of ecological knowledge into the individualist and anthropocentric frames of our language will thus allow us to ourselves become (double)

¹⁹⁶ Spivak 1993 197

¹⁹⁷ Berman 1999 76

¹⁹⁸ Berman 1999 76

¹⁹⁹ Berman 1999 77

²⁰⁰ Derrida quoted in Berman 1999 41 my emphasis

²⁰¹ Derrida 1978 210

²⁰² Meschonnic 2007 55

agents of metamorphosis *both* from *and* into the relational networks of biocultural diversity.

However, this will forever remain impossible if translation is regarded as unnatural;

“Assimilat[ed] to the absurd imitation of human language by parrots, the infra-human verbiage of monkeys, and accused of supreme sacrilege. In truth, we still lack a ‘florilege’ of metaphors of translation: such an account florilege would teach us more on the act of translation.

“assimilation de la traduction à l’imitation absurde du langage humain par les perroquets, au verbiage infra-humain des singes, et accusation de sacrilège suprême. En vérité, il nous manque encore un « florilège » des métaphores de la traduction ; ce florilège nous apprendrait plus sur l’acte de traduire ». ²⁰³

Is there a space in translation studies for ecosystemic translation as a sacrilization of florilege, a *religion-ohne- religion des blumens*? Time is running out.

²⁰³ Berman 1999 45

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