

Macaronics as What Eludes Translation

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Abstract:

'Translation' is one of our all-purpose metaphors for almost any kind of mediation or connection: we ask of a principle how it 'translates' into practice, we announce initiatives to 'translate' the genome into predictions, and so forth. But the metaphor of translation — of the discovery of equivalents and their mutual substitution — so attracts our attention that we forget the other kinds of inter-linguistic contact, such as transcription, mimicry, borrowing or calque. In a curious echo of the macaronic writings of the era of the dawn of print, the twentieth century's avant-garde, already foreseeing the end of print culture, experimented with hybrid languages. Their untranslatability under the usual definitions of 'translation' suggests a revival of this avant-garde practice, as the mainstream aesthetic of the moment invests in 'convergence' and the subsumption of all media into digital code.

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Translation is one of the favourite metaphors of our time. People ask how a slogan is to translate into reality, or how to translate Islamic morals into liberal-democratic form; my university boasts an Institute of Translational Medicine, the task of which is to speed up the practical application of biological discoveries; and so on. Such operations have little to do with translating among languages. The use of the word 'translate' here is more of an unsecured promise that these mediations will occur in the same way and with the same regularity that inter-linguistic translation does. Closer to my concern (and to literal translation of words and sentences), it is often suggested that translation is the real subject of comparative literature.¹ Certainly, translation takes up a great deal of space in the world of words

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today — but not all the space, for like everything, it has an Other. It is this other thing, non-translation, that I would like to investigate.

By non-translation I do not mean the realm of untranslated works, because they could always find a translator; nor do I intend a claim that is sometimes heard, that we cannot or should not translate, or that certain people should refrain from translating. Some hold certain texts to be so holy that translation would defile them. ‘Poetry’, Robert Frost is reported to have said, ‘is what is lost in translation.’² And maybe that is a good thing: Prasenjit Gupta contends that the asymmetries in wealth, power, authority and receivability are fatal to the project of translation between Third World authors and First World audiences.

Even with the best intentions in the world, with the aim of giving Bengali writing a voice in the West, the Western translator, merely by being Western and a member of the global ruling class, usurps that voice. (...) The humanistic motives of the Western translator are parallel to those of the British colonizer who thought he was bringing progress to India.³

The claim is often made that certain words in a language are untranslatable (by which is usually meant, ‘not translatable by a single word of English’: the meanings appear to be paraphrasable enough). All these cases amount to a single kind of claim. These traditional negatives of translation — what cannot be translated or must not be translated — are not the Other I mean to explore. The Other I have in mind is vanishingly close to translation, so much so that it is often mistaken for translation, as it happens usually at close quarters to it and achieves, more or less, the same ends. To see this Other, we have to examine translation, but to look askance, to look away from the specific operation that translation, in the most classic formulations of that term, performs. This kind of non-translation calls on resources different from those of translation; it has its distinct effects; it makes us do different things and engage with bits of the world in a different way.

What do we mean by translation? It is what happens when the meaning of a sequence in language A is reproduced, or transferred, or made to happen again, under the forms of a sequence in language B. Controversies about translation are usually a matter of the accuracy of the reproduction. Thus, it is possible for Emily Apter to say, quite accurately and without contradiction, that ‘nothing is translatable’ and ‘everything is translatable’.⁴ Nothing is translatable if you are looking for a perfect translation; everything is translatable in the sense that nothing is exempt from the possibility of being translated (more or less completely, more or less well). But consider this example. In an

early chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the character Stephen Dedalus is remembering his brief period as a student in Paris. The stream-of-consciousness narration takes us into his thoughts:

Paris rawly waking, crude sunlight on her lemon streets. Moist pith of farls of bread, the froggreen wormwood, her matin incense, court the air. Belluomo rises from the bed of his wife's lover's wife, the kerchiefed housewife is astir, a saucer of acetic acid in her hands. In Rodot's Yvonne and Madeleine newmake their tumbled beauties, shattering with gold teeth chaussons of pastry, their mouths yellowed with the pus of flan breton. Faces of Paris men go by, their wellpleased pleasers, curled conquistadores.⁵

The technique of showing Stephen's thoughts does not have to respect the difference between English and French, for when he thinks about Paris it is natural that just as the images, flavours and associations of the Left Bank come to his mind, so do the French names for these things. It would not do to replace 'chausson' with 'turnover' and 'flan breton' with 'custard', because the English foodstuffs are not made in the same way as the French ones and do not have the same taste or texture: the power of the memory, the Proustian memory we could legitimately say, would be lost in such a translation. Now in the French version of *Ulysses*, translated by two close associates of Joyce, we find:

Paris s'éveille débraillé, une lumière crue dans ses rues citron. La pulpe moite des croissants fumants, l'absinthe couleur de rainette, son encens matinal, flattent l'atmosphère. Belluomo quitte le lit de la femme de l'amant de sa femme, la ménagère s'ébranle, un mouchoir sur sa tête, une soucoupe d'acide acétique à la main. Chez Rodot, Yvonne et Madeleine refont leur beauté fripée, dents aurifiées qui broient des chaussons, bouche jaunie par le pus du flan breton. Des visages de Parisiens passent, leurs charmeurs charmés, conquistadors au petit fer.⁶

In the so-called English text, Joyce had written 'chausson' and 'flan breton', and the translator has apparently given up on translating them, for they appear simply as 'chausson' and 'flan breton'. The words are literally untranslatable into French. What is also impossible to render into French is the effect of foreignness that those two French expressions had when appearing in the middle of a paragraph of English prose. The only way to reproduce that would have been to insert their equivalents in Italian, say, or Spanish or German — but that would involve reworking the setting of the whole episode to a degree that would not normally be permitted a translator.

When foreign words appear in a text, they make it *macaronic*: a patchwork, a hybrid, a graft. The act being performed by the

writer is not one of translation, but of *transcription*, inscription or imposition, much as if the writer were simply inventing a new word ('impositio nominum'). The newness of inscription contrasts with the conventional understanding of translation, which seeks to find a correlation between the already existing terms of two languages. An attempt by the logician Willard Van Orman Quine to show that translation was 'indeterminate', and therefore never reliably successful, yields an unintentional example of transcription. Quine imagines a linguist out in the field with a native informant. A rabbit is sighted, and the native speaker remarks, 'Gavagai'.⁷ Now what is the linguist to make of this? Is 'Gavagai' the word for 'rabbit' in the as yet undeciphered tongue? Are we sure that we are not over-interpreting? Could 'Gavagai' be the name for something that does not have a name in English — something such as undetached rabbit parts, or time-slices of rabbitry, or particular kinds of event to which a rabbit sighting is a contributory but not the defining element? It would not be unreasonable, as a matter of correlations, for a beginner to think that 'Bless you' was the word for sneezing in English rather than a ritualistic utterance with which English speakers respond to a sneeze. With such considerations Quine wants to rob us of our innocent assumption that words designate objects, and that different languages use different words to indicate the same objects. He seeks to make us concede the difficulty, the unlikelihood, of translation.

Yet 'Gavagai!' has come to have a meaning in English. It was invented as a deliberately inscrutable term, but by now, even among people with scanty logical training, like myself, 'the gavagai example' is recognizable without further introduction, an old friend from the exhibit-room of philosophical problems.

Is this acquired familiarity with 'gavagai' a case of translation? Of course not: for one thing, there was never a previous language from which translating could be done. And if translation is a transfer of meaning across differences in linguistic form, it will fail this test as well, for whatever it may mean, the form, in English and all other languages in which I have seen the argument cited, remains the same: gavagai. (Even the Gavagai Café, a business establishment in Taiwan, uses the familiar roman letters to write its name.) The word repeats rather than being interpreted; and repetition does not usually count as interpretation.

Some parts of language we expect to go without translation — proper names, for example. The proper name, as a consequence of its proper status, transliterates and does not translate. A nonce word

like ‘gavagai’ behaves similarly. It sends us back to the first instance of utterance. If I were to ask you what the word for ‘gavagai’ is in Russian or Portuguese or any other language in which Quine’s problem of indeterminacy has been discussed, you could truthfully answer, ‘gavagai’, though you would not be answering any questions about translation in saying so.

One poet who answers my questions about translation is Hugh MacDiarmid. I understand him only about half the time, but hear him in ‘Gairmscoile’:

Mony’s the auld hauf-human cry I ken
 Fa’s like a revelation on the herts o’men
 As tho’ the graves were split and the first man
 Grippit the latest wi’ a freendly han’
 . . . And there’s forgotten shibboleths o’ the Scots
 Ha’e keys to senses lockit to us yet
 — Coorse words that shamle thro’ oor minds like stots,
 Syne turn on’s muckle een wi’ doonsin’ emerauds lit.

(. . .)

Hee-Haw! Click-Clack! And Cock-a-doodle-doo!
 — Wull Gabriel in Esperanto cry
 Or a’ the world’s undeemis jargons try?
 It’s soon, no’ sense, that faddoms the herts o’men,
 And by my sangs the rouch auld Scots I ken
 E’en herts that ha’e nae Scots’ll dirl richt thro’
 As nocht else could — for here’s a language rings
 Wi’ datchie sesames, and names for nameless things.⁸

Part of what MacDiarmid does is translating, but a great deal more is cutting and splicing, fashioning his patchwork of Scots and English into a language encompassing the past, the future, the human, animal and ghostly worlds.

Not everything translates; not everything has to translate; translation is not the necessary channel for every kind of communicative exchange. How big is the territory of exceptions to the rule of translation? Quine mentions cases in which it is easy to ignore the problem of translation, cases where the uncertainties are taken care of for us: for example, when two languages are so closely related that finding equivalents is almost automatic, or where two languages from different families, like English and Hungarian, have in their

backgrounds centuries of shared cultural history and institutions that make it possible to find the ‘same things’ that are spoken of with ‘different words’. Quine is not much interested in these cases, for it is, as he says, ‘the discontinuity of radical translation [that] tries our meanings’. Those meanings are most visibly put to the test when the sentences to be translated across a radical cultural gap

are extremely theoretical. Thus who would undertake to translate ‘Neutrinos lack mass’ into the jungle language? If anyone does, we may expect him to coin words or distort the usage of old ones. We may expect him to plead in extenuation that the natives lack the requisite concepts; also that they know too little physics.⁹

The more theoretical the content of what is to be transmitted, the more obviously it depends on a network of related words, activities, machines and other theories, which must be somehow accounted for if we are to get the meaning of the theoretical statement across. Quine’s genius was to see that this is always also the case, though usually not obviously so.

It is easier to call attention to rabbits than to neutrinos. Importing into what Quine calls, to our embarrassment, ‘the jungle language’ the whole conceptual apparatus of subatomic physics seems a bizarre mission, something that Quine mentions only to awaken our sense of absurdity. Rather than translate the whole language of physics, would it not be easier to teach one of the natives English or German or Russian and then move on to physics in that language? That calculus of benefit blocks us from noticing the interesting thing about translating the physics textbook into the language of the forest dwellers, namely, the compulsion ‘to coin words or distort the usage of old ones’. The act of translating would do violence to the language into which translation is being done. Quine does not stop to look into that violence, that twisting and turning, but we should, if we are to discover what lies just *askance* of translation.

Askance? ‘Askance’ is a word in English, and I think I know English, but this is a word for the use of which I do not have a clear rule. I know how to use it: I can say that theorists of translation look askance at transliteration, but just what kind of relation ‘askance’ denotes is a little vaguer in my mind. As so often happens, ‘I have only one language, and it is not mine’.¹⁰ Trying to lay a firmer hand on the English language, I turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where I learn that ‘askance’ is probably an imported word, but no one is sure from where. Although fossilized and appearing now only in the set

expression ‘to look askance at something’, that is, to look on it with disapproval, loathing or contempt, the word had from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries the meaning ‘sidewise, obliquely, askew, askint’. The dictionary’s citations from Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, tell the story of the word, which also gives in small compass the story of the world as told by Milton:

- iv. 504 The Devil . . . with jealous leer maligne Ey’d them askance.
- vi. 149 Whom the grand foe with scornful eye askance Thus answerd.
- x. 668 He bid his Angels turne ascense The Poles of Earth.

As for the etymology, it is unknown. The Oxford lexicographers continue:

Wedgwood suggests Italian *a schiancio* ‘bias, slanting, sloping or slopingly, aslope, across, overthwart’ . . . Koch suggests a formation on Old Norse *á ská* . . . Diefenbach compares Jutlandish *ad-skands*, West Frisian *skân*, *schean*, which he connects with Dutch *schuin*, *schuins* . . . There is a whole group of words of more or less obscure origin in *ask-*, containing *askance*, *askant*, *askew*, *askie*, *askile*, *askoye*, *askoyne* . . . which are more or less closely connected in sense, and seem to have influenced one another in form. They appear mostly in the 16th or end of the 15th cent., and none of them can be certainly traced up to Old English; though they can nearly all be paralleled by words in various languages, evidence is wanting as to their actual origin and their relations to one another.¹¹

Not passing down the direct line from Old English, but colliding sidewise, or askant, with early modern English, whether coming from Italy, from the Netherlands, or from the far north, the word ‘askance’ gets its force of meaning from a ‘whole group of words of more or less obscure origin’ and undefined meaning, continuing to slide along from the point of impact into the domain of the figurative. The dictionary editors continue: ‘In the fig. phrases *to look*, *eye*, *view* *askance* the idea expressed has varied considerably, different writers using them to indicate disdain, envy, jealousy, and suspicion. The last of these is now the prevalent idea.’ If the idea expressed has varied so considerably, it may be a fair bet that no one using the word ‘askance’ has had a particularly clear sense of what it means, except that it denotes an orientation somehow distorted, perverted and devalued, as distinguished from what is direct and upright. The word’s history looks to be an example of lexical indiscriminateness: a word of uncertain provenance comes into the language, is used in a number of vague and possibly mutually inconsistent senses by authors who may have had

another word in mind. In other words, it exemplifies the behaviour that I see as running contrary to the idea of translation as a substitution of one known meaning for another.

Sometimes substitutes fail us. Let us suppose that we are translating a text from language A to language B — whatever languages you will. Sooner or later a word will come up that refers to a particular circumstance of the climate, flora, fauna, customs or arts of country A, for which no precise equivalent in country B for the moment suggests itself — and this is the case where one says, ‘The thing they call *sherbet*, or *amok*, or *kismet*, or *sharawadgi*.’ Then one goes and explains the thing that has just been named by its foreign name, its name in language A. It is always possible, I hold, to explain *sherbet* or *sharawadgi*; that is how we honour the principle of mutual intelligibility; but in doing so we mark the foreign thing with a name that does not come from language B, the language in which we are doing the explaining, but rather reproduce a name from language A. We thereby transcribe; we become mimics. If the foreign word subsequently takes, if it becomes *the* word in language B for the item we were trying to translate from language A, we speak of it as a ‘loan word’.¹² The term is significant, because it is a lie: a loaned object is one you sooner or later have to give back to the giver, but we have been using *sherbet* since the Middle Ages, *amok* since 1642, *sharawadgi* since 1685, *kaolin* since 1741, and show no signs of returning them to the speakers of Farsi, Malay or Chinese. The feeling that the word is not completely ours, that it belongs somewhere else, makes us call it, apologetically, a borrowing, though in fact we snatched it and intend to keep it. To tell the truth, we could not do without it now.

All languages are packed with loan words. Much of what is not loan words in a language is calques, that is, formations of native words used to imitate a foreign word. ‘Interaction’, a word somewhat overused these days though for a good purpose, was coined around 1830 in imitation of a German term, *Wechselwirkung*. ‘Translation’ was coined in ancient Rome to imitate the Greek *metaphora*. And who knows how *Wechselwirkung* and *metaphora* emerged: possibly as calques on a precedent term that we have lost track of.

As long as it is still recognizable as such, the loan word is mildly shocking; it sticks out like a sore thumb, an *italicized* word or a new penny. Take, for example, the telephone in China — one object among hundreds described in Lydia Liu’s chronicle of the ‘translingual practices’ of modern Chinese writing.¹³ When this object was new and began to be used in the international districts of Shanghai, some people

referred to it as the *delüfeng* 德律風. From the sound of it, I assume the original term was French — *téléphone* — rather than English, but no matter; it was definitely foreign, as you can see from its three-character structure and the fact that the word sequence is semantically absurd: if you did not know what a *téléphone* was, how could you guess from hearing it named, as it is in this loan-word compound, as a ‘wind of virtuous proportion’? Afterwards, or perhaps simultaneously but in a different neighbourhood, someone with a stricter sense of linguistic propriety created a name for the new thing that made it seem as if it had always already had a name in Chinese: *dianhua* 電話, ‘electric speech’. *Dianhua* correlates meaningfully with such other objects and institutions as *dianying* 電影, ‘electric shadows’ or cinema, *dianbao* 電報, ‘electric messenger’ or telegraph, and on down the nineteenth century’s list of amazing media discoveries. *Dianhua*, properly speaking, translates the telephone; *delüfeng* transcribes it.

Dianhua and *delüfeng* correspond to two profoundly different attitudes about language, about the Chinese language and foreign languages, and about innovation or importation. It is convenient for our exploration that many twentieth-century Chinese neologisms exist in both forms, the transliterated foreign word and the semantically motivated native compound. *Dianhua*, the neologism wrought from ancient Chinese roots, proclaims the readiness of Chinese to make room for all kinds of new things as if they had been there all along and just needed to be noticed to acquire a name; the exotic ring of the *delüfeng*, on the other hand, accuses the Chinese language of incompleteness, asserts that there is no way to name the new thing without taking out a foreign loan.¹⁴

Loan words are an opposite to translation in the following sense: with translation, interpretation always precedes the restatement; but with loan words, incorporation occurs without interpretation. Translation works out what the meaning of the foreign text is, then elaborates a corresponding set of meanings that will suitably address the speakers of the target language. With transliteration, foreigners are putting words in your mouth. As often as not, this happens quite literally. Many of the things named with loan words are products meant to be eaten: *a-si-pi-ling* 阿斯匹靈 (aspirin), for example. Someone could have created a phrase like *zhitong yao* 止痛藥 (‘the medicine that stops pain’), or given a chemical definition like acetylsalicylic acid (for which there is certainly a name in Chinese). But *a-si-pi-ling*, like ‘aspirin’, denotes a brand name, not a category of effects; it comes

in a package, with a seal. One must insist on the packing and the seal, because they materialize the mysterious character of the classic loan word, the fact that when you handle one you never quite know what the contents are, but simply convey it as a lump or unit: there is no analytic knowledge to be derived from the *a*, *si*, *pi* and *ling* of *a-si-pi-ling*. (Contrast *zhitong yao*: with that designation, you know immediately what kind of product it is and what it is meant to do.)

Presumably people dislike handling mysterious packages of unknown origin; they also have trouble remembering them. So, in Chinese, many loan words have been devised so as to carry a subsequent interpretation. The borrowing was incorporation with no interpretation, pure mimicry as when English speakers imitated the sounds of *amok*, *ketchup*, *kayak* or *samurai*; but the Chinese language, where every written character has at least a vestigial meaning, allows this mimicry to be doubled with an appearance of sense, so that vitamins, *wei-ta-ming* 維他命, suggest that they have the function of 'guarding one's life', or Coca-Cola, 可口可樂, tells you that it 'can be mouthed, can be enjoyed'. As these examples indicate, the semantic supplement added to the pure loan words is mostly in the nature of advertising, and not always to be believed; this is not precisely translation, just a technique of borrowing that is cleverly adapted to the context of the arrival-point. We should refine our initial formulation, then: it is not so much incorporation without interpretation, but incorporation separated from interpretation; the interpretation comes after the incorporation and is optional, poetic even. Nonetheless, the fact that incorporation can be separated from interpretation installs a strangeness in language, a zone of vocabulary where the mouth acts independently of the mind and where the native speaker and native competency are no longer in command.

In such situations, the wholesale use of loan words and alien constructions is sure to provoke anxiety about purity. Speakers of the language as it used to be feel that it is being adulterated. Joining, as he so often does, clarity of insight with dogged defence of dubious principles, Samuel Johnson gave memorable voice to this sentiment in the preface to his 1754 *Dictionary*:

The great pest of speech is frequency of translation. No book was ever turned from one language into another, without imparting something of its native idiom; this is the most mischievous and comprehensive innovation; single words may enter by thousands, and the fabrick of the tongue continue the same, but new phraseology changes much at once; it alters not the single stones of the building, but the order

of the columns. If an academy should be established for the cultivation of our stile (. . .) let them, instead of compiling grammars and dictionaries, endeavour, with all their influence, to stop the license of translatours, whose idleness and ignorance, if it be suffered to proceed, will reduce us to babble a dialect of France.¹⁵

What Johnson is responding to here is the traces of the original signifiers that cling to even the most ‘domesticating’ translations, and with the passage of time make themselves at home. He is noticing, that is, a faint trace of transliteration in translation, and demanding that it be kept out by restricting translations altogether. As if in response to such nativist sentiment, other translations do their best to cover their tracks and replace the obvious foreign loans with back-formations using the native vocabulary.

Thus, it may seem that transliteration is a stage on the way to translation — that the process is meant to result in a natively rooted new word signalling the successful adoption of a foreign thing or concept; *deliifeng* only a stage on the way to *dianhua*. But sometimes the paraphrase comes before the mimicry; sometimes mimicry is brought in to replace an existing and well-received paraphrase. In the history of long-term linguistic or cultural relationships, we see waverings between the appropriative modes of translation and transliteration. The deciding factor seems to be prestige, or the question of where semantic authority, or its shadow, semantic suspicion, is to be found. The more interesting cases of hybrid writing (translation mixed with transliteration) come about when the less well-known language is considered to have some precious resource that one’s own language does not (yet) have, and the hybridity is meant to make it possible to acquire it.

Hybrid languages are born of migration and contact — sometimes migration of ideas, sometimes migration of people. Creole languages are said to derive their lexical store from one language and their grammatical articulations from another.¹⁶ That is, they do not translate, but ‘migrate’, their source languages to a new target language. As Salikoko Mufwene has pointed out, there is no structural criterion specific to creole languages, despite many attempts over the last two hundred years to identify one.¹⁷ What makes a language ‘creole’, if we are to maintain the term, is not its structure but its historical relation to one or more predecessor languages, a relation of incorporation and remotivation.

The development of creoles is an extension of the dynamic of ‘transliteration’ (not translation) despite the fact that creoles, when they

first entered the written record, were usually considered the language of illiterates. It is perhaps to be expected that a hybrid language will frustrate our ready-made categories.

Creole languages forcefully remind us that translation is not the only way that two languages can be in contact. Transliteration runs throughout all languages and deserves our attention as an independent dynamic. If it can be said that languages evolve, then transcription, or the incorporation of foreign verbal matter, must be essential to the process, as translation, in the traditional sense of the word, only rearranges pre-existing elements of languages kept separate.¹⁸ If we are thinking about cultural contact and transfer through the model of translation, as we too often do, the specific kind of non-translation in transliteration will remain simply invisible, or its difference from semantic translation will be elided.

Characteristically, it is when the language of omnipotent, omnivalent translation is most emphatic that the indispensability of transliteration comes to the fore. Emily Apter's *The Translation Zone*, mentioned earlier, concludes with a fantasia about digital communication as the ultimate extension of translation. 'For it is becoming clear', she says,

that digital code holds out the prospect, at least, of translating everything into everything else. A kind of universal cipher or default language of information, digital code will potentially function like a catalytic converter, translating beyond the interlingual and among orders of *bios* and *genus*, liquid and solid, music and architecture, natural language and artificial intelligence, language and genes, nature and data, information and capital.¹⁹

Similar extensions of the term 'translation' are also favoured by theorists of technology. Lev Manovich remarks of binary code that it serves as a 'visual Esperanto' for word, sound, image, movement, money, every kind of data and difference in the world. 'In new media lingo, to "transcode" something is to translate it into another format. The computerization of culture gradually accomplishes similar transcoding in relation to all cultural categories and concepts.'²⁰ Here then is translation carried to an extreme, for Esperanto was supposed to be the universal language, the language for which two-way translatability was always guaranteed. But Manovich's transcoding/translating metaphor, however appealing, is precisely the wrong one, for digital media do not interpret the contents they vehicle in any meaningful way. Your computer does not understand the Word file you type into it, or express its content to another computer's

understanding when you email the file to a friend. Rather, it codes the letters and formatting into a sequence of ones and zeroes that are then copied on to the hard disk and recopied, through instructions, on to the other person's computer, then re-represented as letters and formatting: transliteration again, incorporation without interpretation. Translating or summarizing content (as when someone recounts a conversation without re-enacting it) is something else. Media do not deal with content; they vehicle content, they permit it to be packaged, they subject it to algorithms and encoding, but no more. And when we deal with digital media, as with technological objects generally, we do not 'open up the black box', so to speak, and understand its coding from the inside. Rather, our relation with media is one of quotation, block citation, repetition and selection. A digitally mediated message is in creole, to the degree that it is complex and multi-medial. I cut and paste; I drop a film clip or a photograph into a PowerPoint presentation. To do this, I do not in the least need to understand the movie camera, the digitization process, the computer program that runs the film clip or the LCD screen that lights up to display it. Each of these things is for me, practically speaking, a black box with a button on it and a cable that I can use to connect it to another black box. I can make things happen with black boxes regardless of my subjective incomprehension of the process, but my linking up of my expressive intent with blocked and chunked automatic operations makes me to some degree a post-human person.²¹

Most technology is inscriptional and transcriptional, rather than translational. We use translation to talk to other humans, because humans are keyed to the meaning-based behaviours that translation can address; but machines simply repeat. When we use loan words, when we devise creoles, we are acknowledging the repetition, the inclusion of otherness, of a machine, in ourselves, transcription as the internal limit of translation.

What are the consequences of distinguishing transcription from translation, catachresis from metaphor, inscription from internalization? I can think of several ongoing projects that might be modified to the extent that their current shape depends on an application of the translation model.

One result would be to re-evaluate 'formalism', as a critical term with a history and as a programme for future research. Languages packed with loan words show us *forms* colliding in new sequences that have not been prepared in the realm of pre-existing meanings. If referred back to this model, 'form' would shed its aestheticist

connotations (and its Platonic ones as well), and become the agent of a consequentialist, pragmatic story about how artworks intersect with their publics and with one another. If a word is an instrument, literary works produce their content through the action of their combinations of forms, after which, perhaps, meanings are attributed to them. The kinship with ideas about the performative, about inscription, about historicity, should be clear. 'Formalism' in this sense would be a type of semiotic materialism, a situation that would be confusing only to those who cling to an automatic Aristotelian opposition of 'form' and 'matter' and assume that 'content', another customary dialogical partner of 'form', must be the same thing as 'matter'.

Theorists of media like to cite Marshall McLuhan's aphorism that 'the content of a new medium is an old medium'. For example, early cinema tried to replicate the look and feel of stage plays. This is true as far as it goes, but it amounts to seeing the new medium as the translation, the equivalent, of an old one. What would happen if we were to insist on the incipient creole character of the new-media product, the respects in which it does not frame an old-media object but is somehow disturbed and exceeded by the imported content? To continue with our example, how does live theatre deform and constrain the pure possibility of cinema? It is traditional to consider this a transitional phase of growth, after which cinema gradually discovers its own potentials and leaves stage acting behind. But what if cinema were to be thought of as remaining to the end of its days an unstable compound of technological artefact and stage representation, with stage representation itself an unstable compound of earlier genres, and so forth? Perhaps — *contra* a persuasive line of argument about modernism running from Jakobson to Greenberg — no medium is ever able to discover its own genuine properties, because it has those properties only through contact with what is not itself.²²

The interpretative cast of the humanities would come under suspicion as well, as inextricably linked to the model that I am calling translation and not so easily brought into relation with what I am calling incorporation. Wilhelm Dilthey offered a kind of charter for the humanities a hundred and fifty years ago, sensing that they were about to be pressed into irrelevance by a new set of disciplines centred around experiment, technological innovation and practical applications. He contended that, although the sciences *explain*, the humanities *interpret*, and they do so by using the individual scholar's mind as a kind of transference apparatus. The natural sciences deal with the realm of necessity, the humanities with the realm of

freedom.²³ The choices made by earlier human beings when they composed documents or performed historical deeds can be identified by us as the sort of choices we too might have made; this realization makes it possible for us to understand them. Dilthey was correct in trying to distinguish the modes of reasoning in the natural sciences and the humanities, but, in so far as his model of intersubjective understanding must pass through the realm of meaning, it is a form of translation. The difference between a humanities of interpretation and the sometimes shockingly dehumanized media theory of thinkers like Friedrich Kittler, Donna Haraway or Bernard Stiegler is an effect of the transcriptional dynamics of the latter. This gives their media theory its investments in object-centredness and temporal discontinuity and often gives us the impression that it is meant to be read with appreciation by a human-machine hybrid.

More broadly, to relegate translation to a secondary position behind transcription would be to make the signifier the active and primary, not the passive and secondary, bearer of artistic energy. 'It's sound, not sense, that fathoms the hearts of men' (MacDiarmid, as above, paraphrased). The argument is that we do not express ourselves, rather we discover ourselves, through our cultural forms. Our forms then become valuable since we no longer see them as mere vehicles for transmitting what is already known. The avant-garde artistic movements of the twentieth century dislocated traditional modes of representation for precisely this reason, and I think contemporary scholarship in language and literature should follow their example, though by that I do not mean stalwartly repeating what the artists, composers, painters and writers of the period 1900–1930 have already done. What transcription can do, when enlarged to the scope of a method, is teach us new ways of behaving with signs that ought to leave us at odds with — askance from — our former selves.

NOTES

- 1 Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). For a perspective inspired by the 'polysystems theory' of Itamar Even-Zohar, see Lieven D'hulst, 'Comparative Literature versus Translation Studies: Close Encounters of the Third Kind?', *European Review* 15 (2007), 95–104.

- 2 Not quite accurately: see *Conversations on the Craft of Poetry*, edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1959), 7.
- 3 Prasenjit Gupta, 'Introduction' to *Indian Errant: Selected Stories of Nirmal Verma*, translated by Prasenjit Gupta (New Delhi: Indialog Publications, 2002), xxviii.
- 4 Apter, *The Translation Zone*, xi–xii.
- 5 James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1961), 42.
- 6 James Joyce, *Ulysse*, translated by Auguste Morel, with the assistance of Stuart Gilbert, Valéry Larbaud and the author (Paris: Gallimard, 1930), 46–7. I have corrected a mistake ('flanc' for 'flan', though I think the more exact term is 'far breton').
- 7 First published as 'Meaning and Translation' in *On Translation*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 23, edited by Reuben A. Brower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 148–72; revised version, 'Translation and Meaning' in Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), 26–79.
- 8 Hugh MacDiarmid, *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 57.
- 9 Quine, *Word and Object*, 76.
- 10 Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, Or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, translated by Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 25.
- 11 *OED*, s.v. 'askance'.
- 12 'Loan word' is itself a calque, from German *Lehnwort*: see *OED*, s.v. 'loan-word'.
- 13 See Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity, China, 1900–1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 372, 297.
- 14 See Y. R. Chao, 'Interlingual and Interdialectal Borrowings in Chinese' in *Studies in General and Oriental Linguistics Presented to Shirô Hattori on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*, edited by Roman Jakobson and Shigeo Kawamoto (Tokyo: TEC Company, Ltd., 1970), 39–51.
- 15 Samuel Johnson, 'Preface to the Dictionary' (1755) in *Johnson's Dictionary: A Modern Selection*, edited by E. L. McAdam, Jr. and George Milne (New York: Pantheon, 1963), 27.
- 16 For the use of 'creole' as a typological term, see Robert A. Hall, Jr., *Pidgin and Creole Languages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966). Hall's assumptions have been called into question. In the case of New World creoles, the creolization scenario often assumes an African grammatical substrate that empirical research fails to uncover. For more recent discussions, see Salikoko S. Mufwene, 'Creoles and Creolization' in *Handbook of Pragmatics Manual*, edited by Jan-Ola Östman and Jef Verschuren (1997), available at <http://benjamins.com/online/hop/>, and 'Jargons, Pidgins, Creoles, and

- Koines: What Are They?’ in *The Structure and Status of Pidgins and Creoles*, edited by Arthur K. Spears and Donald Winford (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997), 35–69.
- 17 Mufwene, ‘Jargons, Pidgins, Creoles and Koines’, 57–60.
 - 18 For an account of reproduction and evolutionary variation hinging on the difference between translation and transcription, see John von Neumann, *The Theory of Self-reproducing Automata*, edited by Arthur W. Burks (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966).
 - 19 Apter, *The Translation Zone*, 227. The engineering point about the catalytic converter is elusive.
 - 20 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), xv, 47, 79.
 - 21 See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
 - 22 See Roman Jakobson, ‘Futurism’ (1919), translated by Stephen Rudy, in Jakobson, *My Futurist Years*, edited by Bengt Jangfeldt (New York: Marsilio, 1998), 145–9; Clement Greenberg, ‘Towards a Newer Laocoön’ in Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), vol. 1, 23–8.
 - 23 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, vol. 1 of *Selected Works*, edited by Rudolf Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

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