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## **Ethics of renarration**

*Mona Baker is interviewed by Andrew Chesterman*

**Chesterman:** Your recent book *Translation and Conflict. A Narrative Account* (2006a) raises some interesting and important issues concerning the practice and ethics of translation and interpreting. You argue that translation is especially significant in conflict situations, and (like most human inventions, I suppose) can be used both for good and for ill. It is thus important to consider both what is translated and how it is translated, and one way to do this is via narrative theory. I'll bring up some queries about narrative theory later, but let's start with some basic assumptions.

One of your fundamental assumptions is that translations (and translators) can never be absolutely neutral, objective, since every act of translation involves an interpretation – just as no observation of any scientific data is ever entirely theory-free. This reminds me of one of the starting-points of the so-called 'Manipulation School' of translation studies in the 1980s (see e.g. Hermans 1985). They too argued that translators inevitably manipulate as they translate, and took many examples, mostly from literary translation, to illustrate this point. How do you see the relation between your approach and theirs?

**Baker:** As with almost any writing on translation (or indeed writing on anything else), there is always some overlap with what others have written or argued. The particular overlap you point to with the so-called Manipulation School also exists with the work of postcolonial theorists, feminist scholars of translation, much of what goes under the banner of linguistic approaches (see, for instance, Mason 1994), work on dialogue interpreting (Wadensjö 1992/1998, Mason 1999, etc.) and many other types of theorizing on translation and interpreting. The difference lies in how this claim is elaborated, specifically: (a) the type of data one examines in order to support the claim, (b) the conceptual apparatus that is applied to the analysis of this data, and (c) the degree of self-reflexivity demonstrated by the analyst. In the case of, say, the Manipulation School, as you have chosen to call it, the data are strictly literary, the conceptual apparatus consists largely of one or another version of system theory, and (to my mind, at least) there is no specific effort to reflect on the analyst's own position. Lefevere (1992) is a typical example.

In *Translation and Conflict*, I drew on examples from a variety of genres, mostly non-literary – examples not only of political conflict, an area to some extent shared with postcolonial theorists, but specifically of *contemporary* political conflict, including the so-called 'War on Terror', state terrorism, Guantánamo, Israeli atrocities in Jenin and other parts of Palestine, bin Laden, Kosovo, etc. Scholars of translation by and large tend to shy away from dealing with issues relating to ongoing contemporary conflict of this type because they are inevitably controversial: consensus has not yet been reached on who is the victim and who is the oppressor, as it has in the case of South Africa or Nazi Germany, for instance. There is also still an element of risk – sometimes very high risk – involved in discussing these contemporary conflicts. The question of risk aside, I believe controversy is healthy,

and that it is productive for the discipline to engage with issues that give rise to disagreement, even passionate disagreement, and for scholars using examples from such contexts to be open about their own positioning.

In terms of conceptual apparatus – perhaps you will want to come back to this in later questions – essentially narrative theory, or the version of it that I tried to elaborate in *Translation and Conflict*, offers new insights that simply have not been explored before in the discipline. It illuminates different aspects of translational behaviour and offers fresh explanations for it. One of its strengths is precisely the fact that it encourages self-reflexivity on the part of the analyst – it makes you constantly aware that you are not analysing other people’s narratives from a privileged position but from a specific narrative location that restricts your own vision in specific ways. It also provides a basis for elaborating an ethics of translation, an issue that I tried to tackle in the final chapter of the book by drawing on Walter Fisher’s work, commonly referred to as the ‘Narrative Paradigm’. (See e.g. Fisher 1987.)

**Chesterman:** Would you agree that the Manipulation scholars were descriptive, whereas you are trying to go beyond description towards some kind of prescription? As Marx said, we do not only need to interpret the world, we need to change it, right? Do you see yourself as lining up with scholars who have challenged a purely descriptive approach and argued for a more engaged, committed translation practice? (For instance, Peter Newmark with his insistence on the value of truth, Lawrence Venuti’s advocacy of foreignization strategies, feminist translators...).

**Baker:** We do indeed need to change the world, especially at this point in history. But even those who think they are not out to change the world are constantly trying to change it, at the very least to change the direction of research within the discipline or change aspects of professional practice – towards what they view as ‘optimal’ modes of research or higher levels of professionalism. All this is also part of the world, so it’s a question of how broadly you cast your net and what you regard as ‘the world’.

It is also true, I think, that there is an element of prescription in *all* theoretical writing, however detached and ‘descriptive’ it attempts to be. It’s a question of degree, and of whether scholars are prepared to be explicit about their agendas in prescribing, however subtly, a particular brand of research.

Even within what you might call a ‘committed’ approach, there are different levels of prescription. Venuti, for instance, strongly advocates specific strategies of translation in specific socio-cultural contexts. This is very different from the approach I have tried to develop in *Translation and Conflict*, particularly in the final chapter, where I attempt to apply Walter Fisher’s work to translation. Fisher deals with ethical issues in a detailed way, and I have found him very useful in reconstructing the path along which individuals might proceed in making ethical decisions. Unlike the work of scholars like Berman and Venuti, in using Fisher’s work my priority has not been to prescribe what is ethical *per se*, but rather to find a way of reflecting on how one arrives at deciding what is ethical in any given situation, translational or otherwise. I think this brings in a different insight and approach to ethics – one that is less rigid (to my mind) and more accommodating of different takes on the same issue, from potentially equally ethical perspectives. There is still an element of prescription, naturally, if only in terms of insisting that we must reflect on our behaviour and be ethically accountable to ourselves and others in our work as translators and translation scholars, as we are in other walks of life. To cease

to be prescriptive in this sense would be to cease to make moral and ethical judgements, which would amount to becoming a non-person!

I don't see myself as lining up with anyone or any group in particular, but perhaps the scholar whose work I have most affinity with is Maria Tymoczko. What I like about Maria's work is the combination of commitment and reflexivity, both underpinned by a descriptive framework of the type that maintains a broad vision despite meticulous attention to detail, and does not pursue what I regard as naïve notions of detachment and objectivity. But I also have much affinity with and great admiration for the work of a number of other scholars, especially Carol Maier, Ian Mason and Moira Inghilleri.

Yes, I would argue for a more engaged, committed translation practice, and translation scholarship. This is particularly important at this juncture in history, when translators and interpreters are heavily engaged in mediating a wide range of violent political conflicts and are themselves being targeted for killing and arrest, where some translators have participated in torturing prisoners in places like Abu Ghraib (see e.g. Zernike 2004), and when an increasing number of professional translators and interpreters are coming together to form groups that set out to use their language skills to effect political change. I am thinking here of groups like Babels, ECOS and Tlaxcala, among others (see Chapter 7 of *Translation and Conflict*, my article in *The Massachusetts Review*, 2006b, and the forthcoming article in the collection edited by Esperança Bielsa Mialet and Chris Hughes). As I have argued in the latter article, developments in the real world of translation and interpreting have now clearly outstripped any attempt at political engagement we have seen in the discipline thus far, and I believe we must start to make a serious effort to engage with these developments if we are to maintain credibility, both in the academy and among professionals.

**Chesterman:** Yes, Tymoczko (1999:110) indeed talks about translation being a 'commissive act'. But she is referring to the translator's implicit promise that the translation does indeed represent a source text. This leads us to consider some of the interesting consequences of the position you put forward, for other aspects of translation studies. Take the concept of equivalence, for example. Does this depend on an untenable assumption of objective neutrality? Do you agree with the scholars who seem to have thrown the idea of equivalence out of the window, or would you like to keep it? Is it of any use, theoretically? If we continue to use it, how should we define it? If we reject it, what alternative concepts could we use instead, in investigating the relations between source and target texts?

**Baker:** Tymoczko has written on political engagement on several occasions and from different perspectives (see for instance her article 'Translation and Political Engagement' in *The Translator*, 2000, and her book *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators*, 2007). She argues, and I agree, that political engagement in the context of translation is not tied to textual interventions (though these are not ruled out). Boéri (in press) makes the same point with respect to the work of Babels, the group of conference interpreters who service the World Social Forum. Political engagement in their case is a matter of choosing to volunteer their time and effort to support linguistic diversity within the WSF, and in so doing intervene in the way in which the Forum develops dynamically over time, to enrich the political debates that can be initiated within that space and the range of voices that can contribute to shaping an agenda of resistance. There is still a textual dimension here. For example,

Babels' 'Lexicon Project' involves "building glossaries with 'politically responsible' equivalents for sensitive or innovative terms of the language of alter-globalization" (Boéri, in press). The use of 'equivalents' is interesting here, since you raised the issue of equivalence in your question. Equivalent to what? These terms are not selected or recommended in relation to specific source texts, but in relation to events in the world and to an agenda of resistance. This means, presumably (though I have no idea whether Babels volunteers have actually considered this question) that if an African speaker uses the term 'Eskimo', and assuming the relevant terminology is covered in the Babels' Lexicon, the interpreter into English would use the more politically responsible term 'Inuit' (or 'Inuktitut' for the language). Equivalence here would have to mean something like 'in tune with what is deemed moral and ethically responsible from a particular narrative location'.

There is also another important point to be made here, and which has been raised by both Tymoczko and Boéri, namely that, as Boéri puts it, we have a tendency "to view the individual translator as the single motor of change, thus downplaying the collective dimension of both translation and activism". Political engagement is not something the individual translator practises in a vacuum, and in relation to just a text. It inevitably involves collaboration with other individuals and groups; indeed the term 'engagement' itself signals this (you have to engage with others, not just with abstract ideas). Babels, Tlaxcala, ECOS, Translators for Peace and similar groups demonstrate precisely this sort of political engagement on the part of translators and interpreters. These are individuals who come together to put their linguistic skills at the service of specific political agendas. And the groups they form in turn interact with other groups who promote similar agendas (for instance Tlaxcala works closely with Axis of Logic, a separate group of activists who do not focus on the issue of linguistic diversity).

I don't think we should ditch the term 'equivalence'. If we did it would be very difficult to compare source and target texts, an exercise which will continue to remain very important to the discipline, and especially in training translators and interpreters. But we should take a more 'relaxed' attitude to it, adopting different definitions of the term in different contexts. As long as we are explicit about how we are using the term on any given occasion, and as long as we alert students and remind ourselves of the inherently problematic nature of the concept, I see no particular difficulty in continuing to use it where it might prove serviceable.

**Chesterman:** So equivalence need not be defined a priori, as Toury has argued. But there is also a more serious question in the background here, which has to do with mediation. Translators and interpreters are commonly assumed to be mediators. For some scholars, this point is also theoretically central. Ubaldo Steconi (e.g. 2004), in his semiotic analysis of the fundamentals of translation, suggests that it is ultimately composed of three basic elements: similarity, difference, and mediation. Does the approach that you explore in your book threaten this idea, of translators as mediators? I have recently seen the publicity flier for a new book called *Translation as Intervention* (Munday 2007). I have not read this book yet, but the theme seems to reflect the kind of position which you take yourself. Are we witnessing a kind of farewell to the idea of translation as mediation? Or would you say that although mediation is often an appropriate goal, it is not always enough: translators should sometimes do more than merely mediate? Or would you like to replace the notion of mediation by some other basic element? I know from your website that you are

critical of the metaphor of translators being ‘bridge-builders’ between cultures. What alternative metaphor would you prefer?

**Baker:** Mediation is one of those terms that are used everywhere but rarely defined. But since you specifically refer to Ubaldo’s work, and since he does define the term, let’s consider his definition and its implications. Ubaldo’s concern is to distinguish translation from non-translation. He argues that mediation is one of three logico-semiotic conditions of translation, the other two being similarity and difference. From this semiotic perspective, he explains mediation as “speaking on behalf of another” (a person speaking on behalf of another person, a text speaking on behalf of another text). In this sense, mediation would be the same as reporting what someone else has said or written, in the same or another language, in speech or in writing. We all assume the task of a mediator in this sense at different times and in different contexts. Does this mean we do not intervene in this ‘mediation’? Do we just repeat the words we heard or read verbatim, or do we interpret them from a particular vantage point and report them (selectively, to varying degrees) in a manner that is sensitive to contextual factors, including our own sense of what is appropriate or inappropriate, and what is ethical or unethical? Sometimes the most ethical thing to do (judged from a particular narrative location) is not to speak on behalf of another at all – it depends on who this ‘other’ is and what they want you to say on their behalf; or what kind of ‘narrative’ a source text elaborates and whether you want to give that narrative currency and legitimacy in a different environment; or whether even if you agree with what the speaker or text says, in your judgement it would be unproductive to repeat it as is, because it would be misunderstood in the target context, or would cause unnecessary hurt and offence, or could be unfairly used against one party in the interaction, etc. All this is a form of intervention, one that any responsible translator will want to make use of at some point in their career. Intervention can also mean proceeding with the mediation, and being as ‘faithful’ as possible in ‘speaking on behalf of another’, but at the same time distancing yourself from their ideas, even challenging them directly. Can you imagine a translator of *Mein Kampf*, for instance, not writing a preface or similar in which they set out their position in relation to this text?

Intervention is inherent in the act of translation and interpreting, as it is inherent in any act of reporting. A person who simply repeats what they heard other people say verbatim would be a social liability, even if, for example, they have been sent to a meeting explicitly as a rapporteur. They would also have to be a machine to be able to regurgitate without interpreting, without selecting and deselecting elements of what was said, and without weighting the importance and significance of some themes and comments according to their own understanding of what the speaker(s) meant – which may not be the same as the speaker’s own understanding of what they said. Intervention means all of this, not just political intervention of the type that activist translators like members of Babels and Tlaxcala engage in.

So I wouldn’t particularly want to replace the notion of mediation with anything else. It is not the term that is the problem, it’s the way we understand it. As for the various metaphors we use in talking about translation, it is true that I find the ‘bridge building’ metaphor particularly naive (I have used it myself in the past, of course, so I am not excluding myself from this criticism!). What I find particularly objectionable about it is the way it is used to suggest that there is something inherently good about translation, and by implication about translators. This romantic assumption only helps to intensify our blind spots and discourages us from

confronting the complexity of our positioning in society. If I were to opt for a metaphor that avoids this tendency to romanticize translation and that reflects the agency of the translator, I would go for translation as renarration.

**Chesterman:** What implications does your approach have for the relations between translators and clients? Personally, I think that the roles of the client and initiator (not synonymous) are rather undertheorized in our field. Where are the limits of the client's responsibility, as opposed to the translator's? Where does the responsibility of the translator end, and that of the client begin? Does the client's responsibility circumscribe that of the translator? And how much does your own position depend on which side the client is?

**Baker:** You are right to want to distinguish between the client and the initiator. Translators often initiate their own translation projects, and they often intervene in these texts in a multitude of ways. They also intervene in texts that have been commissioned by clients. Whether you or I think their intervention is right or wrong does not alter the facts on the ground: the evidence is overwhelming. So, let's be clear that what we are debating here are our personal assessments of right and wrong, what we think should happen, rather than what is actually happening around us all the time.

Like any relationship between human beings, the relationship between translators and clients should, ideally, be one based on mutual respect. This would rule out – for a start – working with a client for whom you have no respect; I would not translate for the CIA, for instance, though I know very many translators do. Having said this, some translators clearly do not have the luxury of choosing not to work with specific clients. Translators in Iraq, for instance, don't have many options at the moment. They have to feed and clothe their families under extremely difficult conditions. If you do end up having to work for a client you do not trust or respect, especially a client who is invading your country and killing and torturing your people, then in my view it is perfectly legitimate to use your linguistic (and other) skills to undermine him or her, or their collective institutions. Michael Cronin puts it very nicely in a 2002 paper:

The role of interpreters throughout history has been crucially determined by the prevailing hierarchical constitution of power and the position of interpreters in it. In this respect, if you or your people are seriously disadvantaged by the hierarchy, the most ethical position can be to be utterly “unfaithful” in interpreting in the name of another fidelity, a fidelity of resistance. (Cronin 2002: 58-59)

The rights of the client (meaning the individual or institution that hired the translator or interpreter) have to be assessed and balanced against the rights of other participants. Just because the client is paying doesn't mean they are entitled to more loyalty or respect from the translator – translators, in my view, should not behave like mercenaries. I am reminded here of an example I used in *Translation and Conflict*, taken from a paper by Marco Jacquemet (2005), about interpreting for the United Nations High Commission on Refugees in Tirana, Albania, in 2000. Because many Albanians were reportedly trying to get into Kosovo by pretending to be Kosovars, the UN established a strict routine to be followed by case workers and interpreters, which involved suppressing the claimants' narratives and focusing instead on their

accents, clothes, and their knowledge of the Kosovo region and its customs. The examples cited by Jacquemet show the interpreter dismissing individual narratives of desperate refugees in order to deliver what the client demanded: a crude verdict on the likelihood of a given individual being a genuine Kosovar, based on things like their accent; in the case of a woman who claimed she was raped by Serbian soldiers, the verdict rested on whether she could identify the colour of the uniform worn by Serbian soldiers, with no concessions made to the possibility that she may have been too traumatised to remember such details.

Other things being equal, and the rights of other participants having been taken into consideration, where mutual respect does exist between a translator and his or her client, then I would consider it unethical in principle for the translator to intervene without alerting the client to this intervention.

**Chesterman:** You mention that translators sometimes initiate their own projects. In such cases, there is indeed no other client to be loyal to; conflicts of client loyalty do not arise. From the ethical point of view, the situation is then more straightforward.

**Baker:** Not necessarily. Initiating your own project doesn't mean that the author, for instance, has no rights, or that the people whose discourse you translate or interpret do not have to be treated ethically. The problem I have with the term 'client' is that it implies we are mostly responsible to whoever pays the cost of translation, but this would be a rather mercenary way of approaching the issue of loyalty, and for that matter the question of ethics. Take MEMRI for example (the Middle East Media Research Institute – [www.memri.org](http://www.memri.org)). They initiate their own projects of translation, but to my mind what they do is extremely unethical, as I have argued in *Translation and Conflict* and elsewhere. They translate carefully selected extracts from a variety of Arab and Iranian sources, string them together into 'reports' under headings which demonise the Arab World and Iran (like 'The Anti-Semitism Documentation Project') and then disseminate this material widely, free of charge, to journalists in North America and Europe and to members of the US Congress. You could say that these people initiate their own translations, but that doesn't make their 'interventions' ethical.

**Chesterman:** No. But the situation is perhaps less complex than when a separate, initiating client is also involved. Agreed, translators and interpreters are not, and cannot be, entirely objective, passive. Absolute neutrality is usually impossible. But the trust given by society and clients to translators surely rests on the necessary suspension of this belief that such neutrality is impossible. Translators and interpreters are trusted to be faithful, not to distort messages in ways that break the prevailing norms. And most currently prevailing professional norms surely state or imply that a translator/interpreter should at least aim at neutrality, etc. If, as you write, translators decide "to strengthen or undermine particular aspects of the narratives they mediate" (105), will clients (and source-text writers) simply cease to trust them if it is eventually found out that they have indeed distorted or adjusted a narrative?

**Baker:** What you are drawing attention to here is the inevitable discrepancy between lay expectations and real behaviour. On the one hand you have expectations based on illusions that both the academy and the profession participate in sustaining for pragmatic reasons. Those who rely on translators and interpreters need reassurance

that they are being heard or read exactly as they want to be heard or read; without this reassurance, however implausible their expectations are in practice, communication cannot proceed satisfactorily. In fact, even with this reassurance being routinely provided by translators and interpreters, in certain contexts we can see that ‘clients’ still mistrust their translators and interpreters, for various reasons. What has been happening to translators and interpreters in Guantánamo and Iraq is just one example (see, for instance, the 2006 report by Levinson on Iraqi interpreters and the suspicion with which they are treated on *both* sides). On the other hand, there is what we know as specialists about the way language and translation work in practice. Unmediated, intervention-free translation is simply impossible, even when the translator is convinced that they should be totally neutral. And given that translators and interpreters are human beings, with a conscience and a sense of what is or is not ethical, there are inevitably situations in which they can find themselves unable to avoid intervening in a more direct sense. I am reminded here of John Le Carré’s novel *The Mission Song*, which has an interpreter as the main character. This highly trained and gifted interpreter, his name is Salvo, works for top clients, including City corporations and law courts. He gradually realises as things unfold on one of his top-level assignments that he is interpreting for parties that are planning a major intervention in Africa, one that will cost many lives. Earlier in the story, before he had had to face this dilemma, he had described himself in terms that are only too familiar to us:

I’m not in their [the clients’] camp but I’m not in the other fellow’s either. I’m stuck out there in mid-ocean ... [I am] the bridge, the indispensable link between God’s striving souls. (Le Carré 2006: 15).

His dilemma unfolds gradually as he begins to realise what he is involved in. Half-way through the book, as he continues to work ‘professionally’ with his clients, he says “I feel dirty and don’t know why” (2006: 180). Before long, he finds himself smuggling evidence of their illicit activities in order to expose their plans and abort the ‘operation’. Is his behaviour ethical? In my view, there is no question: it is, and its opposite – not acting against the client – would have been unethical. Does it unsettle clients and foster an atmosphere of mistrust to realise that interpreters and translators can and do take or switch sides under certain circumstances? Of course it does, but that doesn’t mean we can do much to mitigate this anxiety. We are dealing with human beings, not machines, and no code of conduct or talk about ‘professionalism’ can ever change this reality.

One real-life (rather than fictional) example that proves the same point is Katharine Gun, the British government translator who was tried for treason in 2003 and won her case with the help of many international celebrities. Gun had leaked to the newspapers a top-secret American request for assistance in bugging United Nations diplomats in an effort to win a UN resolution authorizing the invasion of Iraq (see *The Guardian*’s report, 2004). No existing Code of Ethics would recommend divulging a client’s secrets, but in this case the translator (and her many supporters) were certain her behaviour was ethical. Gun is reported as saying “I didn’t feel at all guilty about what I did, so I couldn’t plead guilty, even though I would get a more lenient sentence” (*The Guardian* 2004).

Interestingly, something quite similar happens in academia. Academics too have to project an image of relatively detached scholarship and maintain a relatively clear distinction between teaching and political engagement. If they didn’t parents

would assume that their sons and daughters are being brainwashed at universities rather than ‘educated’ as such, and funding institutions would not provide us with grants. In practice, however, many academics do engage with political issues in the classroom, and many even argue that to do otherwise would be unethical. As Matisons (2003) puts it in relation to guidelines issued by her university (California State University, Sacramento) on discussing the Iraq War with students, “When you support the war, neutrality in the classroom may feel like the way to go. But when you are against the war, then not speaking out against it suggests complicity with an unjustified mass murder”.

**Chesterman:** Let us move now to another point: the concept of narrative, which is central to your argument. My first reaction, when reading the book, was that you are making this concept do a great deal of work. How would you reply to critics who would argue that the concept remains extremely vague and general; that it is so wide that it explains everything – and therefore nothing? Does it mean no more than ‘interpretation’? Or ‘theory’? And why, in Chapter 6, do you switch to the notion of ‘frame’? Do you need both ‘narrative’ and ‘frame’? What is the relation between them?

**Baker:** You are right in suggesting that the concept of narrative does an awful lot of things, and this is perhaps why it is often described as a meeting ground of disciplines. Narrative is not special in this sense; most key concepts in the humanities are similarly all-pervasive and similarly open to various definitions. The same could be said of ‘culture’ and ‘context’, for instance. I will return to this analogy shortly, once I’ve explained what I understand narrative to mean.

As I explained in *Translation and Conflict*, given its appeal and centrality across many disciplines, the notion of narrative is defined in different ways by different scholars. I choose to define it simply as a *story*: specifically, a temporally configured set of happenings or ‘events’ with a beginning, middle and (projected) end. A story, or narrative, is *situated* (anchored in time and place) and populated by participants, real or imagined, animate or inanimate. The term *configured* in this definition means that a narrative is different from a chronology: it is not simply a list of events, dates and participants. It must have a pattern of causal employment that allows us to make moral sense of the events and understand (or construct) the pattern of relationships among the participants. So far so good, and most scholars writing on narrative would accept this basic definition.

Where scholars differ is in whether they treat narrative as an ontological condition. I do, and so does Walter Fisher, who talks about narrative as “the shape of knowledge as we first apprehend it” (1987:193). The implication of this claim is that while things like chronologies and theoretical models (of, say, the evolution of the human species) do exist and can be differentiated from narrative as I have defined it above, the human mind’s reliance on narrative to make sense of the world means that we do not process chronologies simply as chronologies (or theories simply as theories) but tend to construct narratives out of them – narratives that have implications in the real world. We soon configure something like *skopos* theory as a narrative in our minds: the theory evokes (for me at any rate) an industrialized, affluent society populated by clients and highly professional translators who belong to the same ‘world’ as their clients, who are focused on professionalism and making a good living, and who are highly trained, confident young men and women. These professional translators and interpreters go about their work in a conflict-free

environment and live happily ever after. They do not get thrown into Guantánamo or shot at in Iraq, and they do not end up on the border of Kosovo and Albania in the middle of a nasty war, where they would have to decide whether or not to fulfil their commission at the expense of treating potential victims with compassion and respect. The point is not to suggest that this is the narrative that skopos theory necessarily evokes for everyone, or indeed the majority of translators, but to point out that whether we recognise it or not our mind processes even the most abstract form of theorizing using what is ultimately a narrative mode of thinking.

To give you another example, this time of a scientific theory, Landau (1997: 111) argues that the theory of evolution is simply a scientific narrative of human evolution: “The sense of a journey”, she says, “is especially strong in the accounts of Keith and Elliot Smith, in which the hero [man] departs by leaving the trees, but is also conveyed by Darwin, Osborn, and Wood Jones, where bipedalism becomes the means by which the hero “walks away” or “escapes” from his former existence”. All theories are ultimately narratives in this sense.

Another issue I would want to stress here is that rather than agonize about the exact definition of ‘narrative’ (or ‘culture’ or ‘context’) we can focus instead on the way people ‘construct’ these categories in practice in order to negotiate their way in the world – to pursue specific agendas (ethical or unethical), to define their relationships with others, to achieve consensus on the interpretation of a set of events, and so on. Numerous books and articles have been and will continue to be written on each of these concepts, some trying unproductively to pin it down to a single, all encompassing definition and others arguing (as I have done in the special issue on *Context and Translation* that I guest-edited for the *Journal of Pragmatics*, Baker 2006c) that it is much more productive to explore the processes by which people *construct* context, *construct* cultures, and *construct* narratives. And indeed many of the examples I discussed in *Translation and Conflict* and elsewhere are specifically concerned with the way people construct narratives rather than whether what they construct meets all the requirements of a given definition of narrative.

As for frames, I would argue that the concept is different from that of narratives and is helpful as a tool of analysis, to demonstrate how the ‘same’ narrative can be framed in very different ways by different narrators. Just as in the case of a photograph or painting that is surrounded by a ‘frame’, the notion of frame is subsidiary to that of narrative. The frame surrounds (or refers to) a narrative; at the same time, it undoubtedly plays an important role in defining the boundaries of the image (or narrative) and constrains our understanding or appreciation of it. In Baker (2007) I discuss in some detail two different translations into Arabic of Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), published within a year of one another. They are both fairly close translations, with no intervention as such in the text itself, but both include extended introductions that challenge and refute the narrative elaborated in the source text. The introductions ‘frame’ the narrative, providing a lens through which it may be interpreted in line with the translators’ own beliefs about the relationship between Islam and the West and what they regard as the real reasons behind the current conflicts.

As is evident in this example, frames also double up as narratives in their own right (you can think of the interaction between frames and narratives in terms of a set of nested, or recursive relations). The cover image of Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* is very interesting in this respect. It shows the title in yellow against a black background, with a cross (symbolizing Christianity) at the top, a crescent (symbolizing Islam) at the bottom, both in grey,

and a red star separating the first part of the title (*The Clash of Civilizations*) from the rest (*and the Remaking of World Order*). The most obvious interpretation of the red star is as a symbol of communism, especially given that the cover also features the following quote from Henry Kissinger at the bottom, printed in the same red as the star: “One of the most important books to have emerged since the end of the Cold War”. The colour red of course also symbolises danger. The cover functions as a frame in that it anticipates and anchors our interpretation of the narrative elaborated in the book, namely that Islam has replaced communism as the new threat against Western democracies. At the same time, it can be read as a narrative in its own right, a compact version, if you like, of the narrative elaborated in the main text.

**Chesterman:** To me, narratives (in your sense) seem to be interpretive hypotheses. These are tested in practice, on criteria such as pragmatic usefulness, as well as on the power and coverage of the explanations they offer. If they turn out to be not useful, or less useful than competing hypotheses, we can reject them – see your Chapter 7, on assessing narratives. (‘Useful’ needs to be defined, of course; but that would take us too far away from the more specific issues we are discussing here.) One reason why I think narratives are interpretive hypotheses is that they do not seem to be falsifiable, which I take as a crucial criterion for other kinds of scientific hypotheses (descriptive, explanatory, predictive). If someone says ‘X is a narrative’, is there any way in which this claim can actually be falsified? Can someone else say, on some evidence or other, ‘no, X is not a narrative’? (This is not the same as claiming that some other narrative is better than X.) I ask this because the book mentions a huge variety of things that are said to be narratives. So are narratives hypotheses? If so, in what sense?

**Baker:** In one sense they are hypotheses: they are dynamic, open to reassessment continually as we engage in interaction with other people, witness new events, read new texts that offer us a different angle on a narrative, etc. We may revise our narratives in the light of new experience, or we may (as some scholars do with hypotheses) assimilate the new experience into our existing narratives by finding a way of explaining the contradiction while maintaining the narrative intact.

The question of falsifiability is a little more complex. I see no more sense in attempting to ‘falsify’ the claim that something is a narrative than in attempting to falsify the claim that something is a culture, or a context. Just as a culture-less or context-free entity or event is impossible to envision, so an element that is not configured in narrative form is by (my) definition of narrative unimaginable and/or incomprehensible to the human mind. At the same time, a clearly-bounded entity that you can point to and say ‘this is a culture’, ‘this is a context’, ‘this is a narrative’ will always be an elusive thing to capture. This is ultimately also a meaningless pursuit.

**Chesterman:** All definitions are ultimately revisable interpretations, yes; so we seem to agree on this point. Let me turn next to a bigger problem: the relation between narratives, reality and truth. Early in the book (around pages 11-16), you are sceptical of the narrative of science, because science has sometimes been spectacularly wrong. Yes, in time most scientific hypotheses are proved either wrong or inadequate; but would you not agree that scientific hypotheses do, on the whole, seem to progress towards better descriptions and explanations of reality?

If I did not believe that the relevant science narrative is good enough, I would never send you an email; I would never dare to board an aeroplane, and so on. I trust

that the underlying science, and its applied technology, electronics, engineering etc. are OK – at least OK enough to be going on with. In this sense, surely, the science narrative of aeronautics is better than, say, the narrative of little green men in flying saucers. Modern life would be impossible if we had no belief at all in the accuracy of the science narrative. One of the norms of science is surely that it should seek to approximate to the ideal of true theories, just as the traditional norms for translation appeal to ideals of fidelity, equivalence, neutrality etc. This is not to say, of course, that everything science does, or every application of science, is a Good Thing. Nor is it to say that scientists never betray this ideal. Do you take your examples of bad or racist science to be typical of all science? Is *all* science no more than ‘politics in a lab coat’ (11)?

As an academic, you are also involved in the search for true or better theories of translation, right? Aren’t you also a scientist, in this sense?

**Baker:** You have a lot more faith in science than I do; I am not inclined to talk of science in such glowing terms.

First, for many people around the globe, religion (be it Islam, Catholicism or Judaism, etc.) is far more reliable and believable than anything that the scientists in lab coats can ever tell them. You may think that people who believe in angels and rivers of honey that await them in heaven have no more sense than those who believe in little green men in flying saucers, but the fact is that many people do, and that it is their belief in such narratives that shapes their behaviour, not what the scientists tell them. If there is ever any contradiction between (contemporary) science and the Bible, rest assured that the Christian Fundamentalists who exercise considerable influence in the United States will reject and openly challenge the former. You only need to think of the speed with which Creationism (or the theory of intelligent design as it is now called) has taken hold in US schools and universities in the past decade or so, effectively replacing the theory of evolution in many instances. Parents in several parts of the US now refuse to send their children to schools that teach the theory of evolution. The issue is so important in the US that there are entire university courses dedicated to debating the difference between the two competing ‘theories’, Creationism and Evolution (e.g. at Syracuse University).

Second, scientific theories are revised, and sometimes totally discredited all the time. They are also often difficult to assess by non-scientists, especially when the scientists themselves disagree. And where there is disagreement, it becomes very obvious just how ‘political’ science is. At least in Britain, we are constantly hearing different scientists arguing about climate change, some insisting that it is very serious indeed and others accusing them of scaremongering and exaggerating the danger. If science is objective, apolitical, and totally rational, and especially given the technology scientists have at their disposal today, where does the disagreement come from? Unless we accept that much of the disagreement is politically motivated?

Third, I am not sure I subscribe to the narrative of progress that underpins your question, if by progress you mean overall, consistent improvement in our quality of life. There are many who would argue that the meta narrative of ‘progress’ is too linear and too insensitive to the complexity and dynamics of change. For example, while you and I may appreciate the ability to travel and see the world, we cannot ignore the fact that the same scientific and technological advances that have made our lives easier and more enjoyable in these respects have also brought the world more pollution, alienation, a culture of consumerism and, of course, the nuclear bomb, biological weapons, and untold suffering! And so I would argue that it is untenable to

think of ‘progress’ in positive terms only. And similarly in terms of science, I don’t find it convincing to think of a linear process of progress towards better understanding.

Having said all this, we have no option as human beings on the whole but to ‘trust’ in whatever the experts (including the scientists) tell us at any given moment in time. Since we have no way of testing their theories for ourselves, we have to believe in them until new theories ‘prove’ them wrong. In our own work, on the other hand, we continue to search for better explanations for the phenomena we are studying, not because there is a linear process by which we can advance towards better science as we move on, but because our theories have to adapt to our changing environment. As the world around us changes, so our perspectives on different phenomena change, and we feel we need a different explanation, or a different framework from which to engage with our object of study. This is necessary because the object of study itself is dynamic – it does not sit still while we develop better and more comprehensive theories to explain it. It changes because the world changes, and our theories have to follow that dynamic. ‘Translation’ today is not the same as it was 50 years ago. And our theories of translation are not better (in absolute terms) than those elaborated 20 years ago. They may, however, succeed in relating more meaningfully to the way in which translation functions in society today.

**Chesterman:** Glowing terms? I certainly do not assume that scientific progress necessarily means a better quality of life for all. I would distinguish between progress in understanding, on one hand, and what we (or the scientists) then decide to do with this understanding, on the other. As you say, we are not all happier because some nations now have nuclear bombs. On your second point, I think there is plenty of space for legitimate *non*-political debate within science: about what are interesting research questions (what is *worth* trying to understand), what counts as evidence, how given evidence is best interpreted, whether and how one explanation is superior to another, and so on – just as there are disagreements about the fundamental nature of the reality we are trying to understand.

On p. 17 you cite Bruner on ‘the possibility of narrative as a form not only of representing but of constituting reality’. That is, narratives both represent and construct reality. You then seem to focus more on the constructing side than on the representing side. But if there is indeed a something to be represented, that representation can surely be more or less accurate – we are back at the equivalence debate! Agreed, translations do not *only* represent; but they do aim to represent, in some way. Does this aim get lost in your focus on the ‘spins’ given to representations by conflicting narratives? Even if we agree that perfect representation is impossible, that does not mean that we should give up any attempt to represent. After all, we know we shall never reach complete understanding of anything, I suppose; but we can still try to understand a bit better...

**Baker:** Bruner is among those scholars who do not subscribe to the view of narrative as an ontological condition. He treats it as one of two modes of cognitive functioning, the other being paradigmatic cognition. This is why he talks about narrative representing as well as constructing reality. I am more inclined to agree with Hayden White, who insists that the world does not come to us “already narrativized”, already “speaking itself” (1987: 25); it has to be ‘constructed’ in order to be apprehended and communicated to others. This doesn’t mean that people simply make up stories out of thin air (though sometimes they do). It does, however, mean that direct, unmediated

representation is impossible. So, at best we might speak of narratives as selective representations of reality. As Novitz puts it with respect to personal narratives, “although my story purports to be about certain real-life events, and so is nonfictional, the way in which I relate and organize my memories of these events, and what I treat as marginal or central to my life, can be more or less imaginative” (1997: 146).

You are right of course in suggesting that despite the fact that ‘accurate’ representation per se is impossible we always aim to understand better, to be more fair, objective, and truthful in our narration of events. Human beings aim for ideals even as they acknowledge that they are unreachable; such is human nature.

**Chesterman:** Should we only translate texts that ‘do good’? At the beginning of Chapter 6 (p. 105), you write: “Translators and interpreters face a basic ethical choice with every assignment: to reproduce existing ideologies as encoded in the narratives elaborated in the text or utterance, or to dissociate themselves from those ideologies, if necessary by refusing to translate the text or interpret in a particular context at all.” You also cite Séguinot here, who thinks that translators are normally in a position to turn down assignments. How realistic is this? How many professional translators, who translate for a living, can really turn down work?

**Baker:** Making texts available in translation can ‘do good’ even if we disagree passionately with the narratives they promote. It depends on how we frame the translation. Tlaxcala and other groups of activist translators often translate and circulate texts produced by the neocons in the White House (for example the text of the Project of the New American Century), because they believe people should be aware of them. But they clearly signal their detachment from the narratives encoded in these texts, and they challenge them by translating many other texts that promote very different narratives.

Many professional translators are in a position to turn down some assignments, and many do. The fact that some translators and interpreters do not have the luxury of choice does not mean that others should take no responsibility for theirs.

**Chesterman:** In the same context, you write: “Like any other group in society, translators and interpreters are responsible for the texts and utterances they produce” (105). But to what extent? Are they responsible for any possible use made of their translated texts, even years later? How can they predict all possible undesirable consequences? Don’t blame the translator? Can’t *any* text be used for ‘bad’ ends?

**Baker:** I don’t think translators are different from any language user in this respect. We all produce texts and utterances which, despite our best intentions, can be used unethically by anyone in a position to do so. Indeed, sometimes our own texts can be manipulated and decontextualized in order to be used against us, never mind anyone else. But this doesn’t mean we abrogate all responsibility for the texts we produce. Some uses at least we should be able to anticipate and should consider distancing ourselves from.

Yes, of course: practically *any* text can be used for bad ends. It depends on how it’s framed, when and where it is released, and how selectively it’s quoted. Translations are open to this type of manipulation in the same way as other texts.

**Chesterman:** Translators also seek to stay alive. So do underpaid workers in

unethical sweatshops around the world. Should we tell these exploited workers that they should not agree to help make products which may be environmentally damaging or which may encourage an ideology (a narrative?) of rampant consumerism – even though this may mean that they then starve? (Is this a fair comparison with translators who need to accept all the work they can get?)

**Baker:** Yes, I think it is a fair comparison, but only in relation to *some* translators in particularly difficult situations. Not all translators need to accept all the work they can get. Many, especially in the Western world, where most of the influential theorizing about translation takes place, are in a position to turn down a few jobs, and to seek employment either as freelancers or with reasonably ethical organizations, rather than the CIA, Walmart or the Israeli Defence [sic] Forces, for instance. Similarly, I would argue, the fact that many people less fortunate than ourselves have to work in sweatshops and cannot survive or feed their families without the money they earn there doesn't mean that you and I should not raise our voices against the companies that exploit them; not only raise our voices but also boycott these companies and their products. I am not alone in adopting this logic – many activists across the world boycott companies like Nike and Nestlé precisely for these reasons, without however blaming the workers for the unethical behaviour of the companies that employ them. Compassion does not preclude action, and action similarly does not preclude compassion.

**Chesterman:** Agreed. Your main point about narrative adjustment also applies to other forms of rewriting, not just translation. At some points in the book, I wondered whether you are also doing some narrative 'tweaking' yourself (inevitable?). On p. 14, for instance, you paraphrase Bokor's 'regret' for all civilian casualties as implying that collateral damage is 'acceptable' to him. Is your representation of Bokor a fair one here? Isn't he saying that collateral damage and deliberate slaughter of civilians are both regrettable, i.e. unacceptable, but that the latter is even worse than the former?

**Baker:** I would argue that on the whole my representation of Bokor's position is fair. You have to place this statement in context in order to arrive at (my) understanding of his narrative position.

First, there is the amount of textual space he allocates to his editorial of October 2001 (following the 9/11 attack) vs. the space he allocates to the editorial of April 2003 (which coincided with the invasion of Iraq). The first, entitled 'Translation and International Politics', is 493 words in length. The second, titled 'War and Peace', is a mere 156 words. Bokor clearly attributes much more importance to the events of 9/11 than to the impending invasion of an entire country, bearing in mind that US politicians were already publicly promising Iraq the 'shock and awe' treatment by the time Bokor was writing his second editorial.

Second, you have to look at the overall tone of the two editorials. The October 2001 editorial is passionate and indignant, repeatedly describing the events of 9/11 as "mass murder". Not only does Bokor go on to tell us that the (military) response of the US is "inevitable", but he expresses unequivocal and unqualified support for it: "I believe that mass murderers should be punished and ideologies that encourage such crimes should be decisively resisted". As for who these murderers are and what ideologies they promote (and remember these were very early days, and no one knew then who exactly carried out the attacks), Bokor clearly implies that they are Arab, by

singling out Arabs and Muslims for special mention: “the attacks which resulted in the death of thousands of innocent people, certainly including Muslims and other sympathizers of Arab causes”; “In the past few days, I’ve received messages of sympathy from many countries, including from the Arab world”. These are the words of someone who is absolutely confident about who is right and who is wrong and is not going to lose any sleep over some shock and awe campaign that is bound, by his own admission, to result in many civilian deaths.

By comparison, Bokor’s brief April 2003 editorial merely tells us that “It is not the policy of this publication to take sides in political disputes”. No indignation, and no condemnation of mass murder. Remember that the sanctions that preceded the attack on Iraq and were sustained by the US since 1991 had already resulted in what can only be described as a mass murder: the lowest and most conservative estimate (by UNICEF) puts the death toll at 500,000, many of them children. This was already common knowledge when Bokor wrote his editorial.

**Chesterman:** That additional contextual information certainly clarifies your interpretation.

My final question is prompted by a citation on p. 46, where you quote Alexander (2002): ‘The endpoint of a narrative defines its telos.’ Skopos theory has highlighted notions of purpose and aim in translation studies. We now have a well-formulated concept: the skopos of a translation. This is defined as the intended function of the translation, as required by the client and accepted or adjusted by the translator. What interests me in this context is the way the skopos is tied to a text: it is the function of a text, not the goal of a person. It occurs to me that translation theory might need a new concept to describe the ultimate motivation of the translator (or interpreter, of course). Translators work to stay alive, yes. But they also have a number of other motivations: a love of languages no doubt, an interest in other cultures, perhaps a desire to improve communication, and so on. What your book argues is that translators could (or should) take the consequences of their actions more seriously, and thus be more aware of their own motivations and opportunities.

There is a traditional Stoic distinction between *skopos* and *telos* that has been much commented on by classical scholars and theologians. Skopos is usually taken to refer to more immediate intentions, the visible target literally aimed at by an archer for instance (originally, skopos means a watcher, an observer), whereas telos refers to a more distant or ultimate state, such as the more abstract goal of life as a whole, ideally perhaps a final harmonious state. The telos is a result rather than an intention.

Suppose, alongside skopos, we adopt the term ‘telos’ to describe the personal goal of a translator, firstly in the context of a given task. Some tasks are done just for the money, but others might have different teloi. If a translator is asked, especially during a voluntary translation task, ‘why are you doing this?’, the answer could be a formulation of this primary telos. Formulating a more general telos might be one way of answering a bigger question: why did you become a translator? Or more generally still: to what ultimate goal should all translators and interpreters be committed? What is (or should be) the ultimate telos of the profession as a whole?

How do you react to this idea, Mona?

**Baker:** I think it is a very interesting suggestion. Perhaps the idea of a ‘telos’ as you describe it can help us think our way through the ethics of our profession, not in romantic terms, as when we talk about bridge-building and promoting understanding between different people, but in more concrete and politically-aware terms. I can see

it working quite well within a narrative framework. One would have to construct a narrative of the profession (and the discipline) in order to project a telos, or a set of teloi, since a goal lies at the end of a path that has a beginning and is temporally and spatially configured. A telos is a more productive concept than skopos because it connects with the wider context of a whole society, and potentially of humanity at large.

This will require a fair bit of thinking to elaborate in any useful detail, but I like it in principle and await your next publication to learn more about it!!

**Chesterman:** Well, let's say that the idea is open for potential development! – Thank you for answering these questions, Mona. Let us hope that CULTUS readers will add their own voices to the debate.

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