

Maitland, Sarah. (2017) *What is Cultural Translation?* London & New York: Bloomsbury, 177pp. ISBN 978-1-4725-2627-4 (pb) £24.99. ISBN 978-1-4725-3091-2 (ePub) £24.99. ISBN 978-1-4725-2686-1 (hb) £90.00.

Since its introduction to translation studies, the concept of cultural translation has been problematic in terms of its definition and its recognition within the field. This term came into academic discourse from the field of anthropology, before Bhabha's (1994) *The Location of Culture* introduced it to translation studies to describe the transformation of cultural identity experienced by migrants from the Indian subcontinent to the western world. Its use in translation studies from the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, would engender some confusion over its exact meaning, with papers published on cultural translation detailing it through frequently under-developed and incoherent arguments (Buden and Nowotny 2009) which were critiqued from within the field (Pym 2010; Chesterman 2010). Sarah Maitland's new book, billed as the first book-length study of cultural translation, endeavours to provide much-needed clarity to the concept. Maitland's objective is to delineate the five broad dimensions of her process of cultural translation:

[T]he interpretation of a plurivocal 'text' to be understood; an act of reading across a distance of time and space; the incorporation of the text within the sociocultural context of the translator; the transformation of meaning for a purpose; the emancipation of the translator as a reader. (p. 10)

The foundation for Maitland's arguments derives from Ricoeur's regard for translation in the context of Europe as an ethical model for the hospitality of otherness (Ricoeur 1996) since, "as a hermeneutic enterprise par excellence the translational model represents the practical outworking of Ricoeur's theorization" (pp. 5-9). The translator is first and foremost a reader, and so they are required to understand and translate a text across languages, space, time, and readership. In this way Maitland focuses in her definition of cultural translation on viewing the objects of the world as source texts and those engaging with them as translators (pp. 9-10). In this review, I critically summarise the introduction and the chapters in Maitland's work, with a focus on its fifth and final chapter where this process culminates in demonstrating how a productive harnessing of translation might suggest different understandings of disputed events and thus act as a means of critiquing ideology.

Maitland's introduction outlines the triangular task the book aims to accomplish: to engage clearly and continuously with the theoretical model on which it is built; to base itself in interlingual translation; and to engage with illustrations "drawn from across the social imaginary and beyond the world of letters" (p. 18). In drawing on the interlingual model, cultural translation can focus on the encounter and questioning of difference in all communication, broadening its scope to support the discovery of the ways in which "people and ideas are encountered, interpreted and transformed" (p. 28). Cultural translation is examined "as the traceable presence of hermeneutic gestures of reading and writing in the construction and reception of a range of cultural phenomena present in the public sphere" (p. 28), with case studies in each chapter highlighting how these gestures "can be witnessed and explored in action" (p. 29). Through such an analysis, Maitland considers how translation studies might encourage the testing and adoption of its models to benefit both its reputation and other disciplines through a precise theorization of cultural translation as a discourse "capable both of illuminating power relationships in the world *and* of criticizing them" (pp. 21-24).

In Chapter One Maitland argues that we are constantly engaged in translation as an act of knowledge-creation and understanding, underlining that "the problem of understanding is a feature of all language", and that language "always points to something beyond itself" (pp. 35-36). Language points not only to understanding, but also meaning, and for Maitland, "human works are precisely possessing of meaning because they are reflective of life" (pp. 49-50). In this way, to understand language is to understand human nature, with interlingual translation sharing with hermeneutics a quest towards understanding from a starting position of mystery (pp. 51-52).

The second chapter continues Maitland's theorization in considering how distanciation emerges from the writer and audience operating in two separate spaces and times. As with human activity, the undefined nature of the recipient of a written text renders an infinitesimal number of readings of a text possible (pp. 61-63, 74-75). It is therefore more important to understand what a text means in its current context than what it meant to its author, whose intentions are firmly rooted in the past (pp. 65-72). Distanciation "signals everything that makes 'understanding' impossible" denoting a similarity to translation in that total understanding and correspondence of meaning appears impossible (pp. 77-78). Hermeneutics, therefore, has to concern itself with the text itself as the process of

interpretation leaves the modern-day reader's time and place as the only constants (pp. 78-80).

Chapter Three considers the text's position in the translator's sociocultural situation. Maitland turns to the hermeneutics of interpretation and spatio-temporal distancing that are so pivotal to the creation of a translated text, using British map-making in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which depicted a vast, central, imperial Britain, to exemplify this. Distancing demonstrates the errancy of human comprehension, and the challenge it poses is not the experiential divide between the reader and the text, but the need to bridge it (p. 88). Interpretation, meanwhile, is a revelatory act, and one which is "both embodied and historical" (pp. 91-93), taking place in a present moment and place and integrating our own idea of the text into it. Translation is an exercise in preserving and overcoming distance, and therefore an operation of containment – taking over the foreign land of the text and in overcoming its foreignness possessing it, thereby narrowing down infinite interpretations of a text to only one (pp. 99-103).

The fourth chapter focuses on translation's transformative capacity. Maitland references Hollywood reboots to highlight how interpretative objects, in retaining elements from the original while appropriating the source material, are not sites solely of loss but of gain (pp. 108-109). In Steiner's (1998) hermeneutic model, the recognition of the merit of a text precedes its appropriation, and so translation can act as a means of upholding the text beyond the original, uncovering the value of work known to few preceding its translation (pp. 110-111) and keeping the source text alive (p. 123). Since creating likeness is a futile task, the translation of these texts must be creative, constructive, and innovative, producing newness rather than imitation (pp. 123-124), and, if distancing inevitably entails an irreversible transformation of the text through appropriation, then there is an opportunity to "turn this transformative hermeneutic into creative, resistant, potential to deliberately disrupt the status quo and perhaps even to change hearts and minds along the way" (pp. 125-129).

This resistant potential emerges in Chapter Five, which explores translation's ability to act as a critique of ideology. The final stage in the hermeneutic process of translation is to give the text significance and for the reader to validate their interpretation of it (p. 133). This demands not only recognition of other forms of selfhood but transformation by them, an engagement beyond the text with human action (p. 142). The social media manoeuvres of 'Britain First' a

far-right movement, and the satirical response to them by ‘Britain First’, demonstrate how satire, as a form of intertextual engagement, might be used as a form of resistance to “encourage critical thinking, to bring to thoughtful reflection rather than foster marginalized entrenchment” (pp. 142-145). Maitland then concentrates on how interpretation may be harnessed in order to critique ideology (p. 145). Critique of ideology becomes possible through making its agents and institutions interpreting subjects; in demonstrating themselves to have only one hermeneutic guess among many, they need to recognize their own fallibility and demonstrate the greater significance of their view above others. This “circular process of endless enquiry” reminds us “that human understanding is an ongoing work of contestation” (p. 134).

Critique becomes possible when translation allows ideologically motivated apprehensions to be interpreted, and in examining conflicting interpretations through a purposeful translation process a new understanding of the world around us becomes possible (p. 158). A translational critique of ideology at work is exemplified by the Ashers Bakery case, and an examination of the contentions of both sides of the case (pp. 131-133, 151-156). This incident concerns a ruling made in May 2015 by Belfast County Court that this Northern Irish Christian-run business had acted in a discriminatory manner by refusing to meet an order for a cake with a slogan supporting gay marriage. Two competing interpretations emerge: that of the Northern Irish Equality Commission, a body which protects against discrimination in the province, and that of Ashers and their supporters, the Democratic Unionist Party, who planned to bring a ‘conscience clause’ into law allowing businesses to legally refuse services conflicting with their religious beliefs. The DUP and the Equality Commission are framed as interpreters of the questions the case raises – religious and moral freedom, tolerance, human rights and equality of opportunity. This case contains a critique of ideology in that these two competing points of view, as two out of many, make it possible to call into question the apprehensions of the subject, and thus require each party to test and validate its hermeneutic guess. Consequently, interpretation has the potential to transform the interpreting subject. As the interlingual translator’s work is characterized by its purposeful aiming towards a specific end goal, the reader, it is but one guess among many, and so in the Ashers case each party would have to acknowledge the interpretations of others and, “to translate *back* to the interpreter the interpreter’s own translations of others” (p. 156). Back translations in this case include protests against and a petition to halt the conscience clause, viewing it as a ‘text-for-interpretation’ of the DUP, and bringing it back into the hermeneutic process, thereby making

it an interpreting subject of its own actions and those of others (p. 156). Cultural translation, in this way, requires authors of ideology to acknowledge themselves by means of their interpretations through which they acknowledge the world and question the authority of their own stance, giving cultural translation a resistant element (pp. 156-157). In its critique of ideology, cultural translation offers “something different and better; a different way of viewing things; a contrapuntal construction of events; a different characterization of the lead characters; a different presumption of authority with which to represent the views of others” (p. 157).

Maitland’s conclusion describes how interlingual translation is most insightful as a site of intercultural encounter, expressing that “all translation is cultural translation,” as all interlingual translation takes place within the boundaries of hermeneutics of variance and contingency (p. 159-160). The translator’s embeddedness across space and time positions translation as primarily an act of “cognitive outreach,” while hermeneutics is an ontological exercise since it encourages us to displace ourselves in the act of appropriation, to be critical and to eradicate some of the certainty of our thinking (p. 161). Cultural translation is essential, then, since in searching to understand the world around us through engagement with its texts and human actions, it allows us to learn something about who we are and what we know (p. 161). It demonstrates our *need* to translate to understand ourselves and our standing in the world, a necessary step for our emancipation and the first, “towards a critique of ideology and the last word in absolute knowledge” (p. 161).

In summary, *What is Cultural Translation?* is a timely work that responds to the need to provide a considered and well-researched definition of its titular concept, and one which establishes the importance of applying a wider definition of translation in order to better understand ourselves and others. Meanwhile, the illustrations Maitland uses to bolster her arguments, from memes to Greek mythology and Star Trek, serve to make her arguments more accessible to those approaching the subject from outside of translation studies. Maitland’s analysis of cultural translation demonstrates it to be a meaningful and valuable concept, and so this book ought to be of interest to all translation scholars, as well as researchers in other fields seeking a reliable perspective on cultural translation and wishing to apply it to their own research.

Caleb Keown

PhD candidate in Translation Studies

Centre for Translation and Interpreting Studies

Queen's University, Belfast

References:

Bhabha, H.K. (1994) *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge.

Buden, B. and S. Nowotny (2009) 'Cultural Translation: An Introduction to the Problem', *Translation Studies*, 2 (2): 196-208.

Chesterman, A. (2010) 'Response', *Translation Studies*, 3 (1): 103-106.

Pym, A. (2010) 'On Empiricism and Bad Philosophy in Translation Studies', *Intercultural Studies Group*. Available online at [http://usuaris.tinet.cat/apym/online/research_methods/2009_lille.pdf] (accessed 15 August 2017).

Ricoeur, P. (2006) 'Reflections on a new ethos for Europe', in R. Kearney (ed) *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, London: Sage, pp. 3-14.

Steiner, G. (1998) *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.