



Book Review

**Hermans, T. (2007). *The Conference of the Tongues*.
Manchester/Kinderhook: St. Jerome.**

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The title *Conference of the Tongues* at first sight raises questions as to the particularities of its pertinence to translation studies, i.e. the range of possible subject matters subsumed, and is somewhat loosely explained in the preface by a short and factual hint to its historical origins (in sixteenth-century Spain in a paratext to a translation of Aesop). There is no further elaboration on the motivation for the choice of this title however.

The work under discussion consists – as stated in the preface – of an expanded and revised version in book form of a number of articles published elsewhere by the author. They are marked by the characteristic laconic style in which the author is wont to present his examples and by the unconventional approach which, as is also claimed on the book jacket, is indeed capable of casting some of the central and recurring concerns within translation studies in less familiar light.

Thus the author takes up once again the issue of equivalence, which has otherwise long been regarded in translation studies as no longer particularly productive, from a different angle discussing it at length in relation to an approach informed by systems theory. In the process it becomes apparent that the primary orientation of the work is a meta-theoretical one, for a running theme throughout the work is the concern not only with the characteristics of translations but also with the basic nature of translation, and with the possible subject positions of translators associated with, or first disclosed by, different conceptions of this basic nature.

In the first chapter, in the context of a critical examination of progressively more powerful conceptions of equivalence – understood here as ‘exhibiting equal value and status’ – the author employs three examples to show that translations cease to exist as such the moment they take the place of the original. To illustrate this thesis, he cites, first, the translation of, and the associated traditions of ‘instituting’, religious texts, second, the fact that international legal treaties are equally binding in different languages, and, third, somewhat weaker forms that nevertheless are also reminiscent of ‘authentication’, for instance self-translations, i.e. translations produced by the authors themselves.

The above thesis serves the author in what follows as a point of departure for exploring, in the second and third chapters, the space opened up by the self-referential character of translations that is always present, albeit in different specific forms – assuming of course that the translations continue to be regarded as such. In this the author ventures more onto the terrain of philosophy and the philosophy of language. He presents both wide-ranging and detailed reflections that render intelligible the attitudes of translators to their own work, which can find expression, for instance, in ironical distance from the original, in (critical) reference to previous translations, and the like. In discussing these issues, the author devotes considerable attention to resulting value conflicts. Moreover, this goes along with a discussion of conceptions of translation that situate it in a domain between quotation, direct and indirect speech, and diegetic and mimetic discourse. This discussion

develops further the contributions of other researchers also as regards the resulting degrees of freedom and relations of responsibility and accountability.

A further, fourth chapter draws on examples from theology and derives fruitful conclusions for translation studies from the notions of the Eucharist originating in and central to Christian teaching concerning faith and salvation, specifically from the centuries-long religious conflicts over the 'transubstantiation' of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. This probably represents the part of the monograph under discussion that, on balance, goes farthest beyond existing treatments by the author. The consensus that a text constitutes a translation, which is produced by a speech act, also rests in a certain sense on an act of faith according to Hermans (p. 91), one which at the same time relies on particular features of the institutional context for its success. This has far-reaching implications for understanding translations, for then it is no longer just a question of the relation between original and translation.

The fifth chapter, which involves some minor modifications and revisions of the author's earlier positions in the sociology of translation (for details see Tyulenev, 2009), engages in a debate with approaches influenced by Luhmannian systems theory from the vantage point of translation studies, and addresses both the training of translators and the history of translation also from the perspective of systems theory. On this interpretation, crucial stages in the formation of translation are depicted as an autopoietic system characterised by growing autonomy and increasing complexity.

The book closes with a call for greater readiness on the part of Western translation studies to include other cultural perspectives, though it remains unclear what exactly the author means by 'Western' in this context. Always with reference to translation and research on translation, the author claims that this readiness should also be reflected in efforts to produce 'thick descriptions' in Clifford Geertz's sense. Here Hermans adds some nuances to existing discussions, though it remains unclear how he is able to conclude that translation studies is in this regard "still, comparatively speaking, a thin discipline" (p.150) while at the same time ignoring relevant publications on parallels between critical, self-reflexive ethnography and translation studies (see for example Sturge 2007; Wolf 2002).

Unfortunately, while earlier essays by the author underlying individual chapters (or published concurrently) exhibit a high degree of intellectual acuteness (see for example Hermans, 2007) the work under discussion as a whole falls somewhat short of this. As was already true of *Translation in Systems* (1999), these essays have the considerable merit, among many others, of securing a fixed place in translation studies for Luhmannian systems theory in particular (on the latter see the critical treatment in Tyulenev, 2009). Especially against this background, as measured by the author's importance for the development of and critical engagement with the systems-theoretical approaches within translation studies, as well as (though not just) sociologically and historically oriented approaches, the judgment concerning the present volume must remain comparatively muted. Anyone who is acquainted with the author's previous publications and turns to *Conference of the Tongues* expecting a development of essential lines of thought, will find that it goes beyond established accounts only in isolated passages. In spite of the fact that, as noted above, the meta-theoretical debate over the 'basic nature' of translation is a recurring motif throughout the work, the yoking together of a whole range of concepts involves at times a certain amount of force that makes demands on the reader not only in a positive sense. This is also reflected in the fact that the transitions at some points appear rather strained, however, refreshing, not to mention insightful, from

the perspective of philosophy and the history of culture his detailed observations may be.

The book, especially the cover, is illustrated lavishly and with much consideration to detail. Only one of the figures (p.90) is reproduced in rather poor quality which slightly affects the appreciation of the following discussions which are based on the description of the painting. The index, in which names and subjects are not treated separately, is reasonably helpful.

The reserves encountered above notwithstanding, *Conference of the Tongues* is a work of considerable insightfulness and cultural-historical depth which undoubtedly has to be considered as indispensable reading for scholars with a wide range of interests within the growing and diversifying field of translation studies. Had the volume been published expressly as an essay collection and had it been edited more carefully – for example with particular attention to the length of the presentations and treatments of second-hand examples where their content justifies their inclusion – there would have been no objection to juxtaposing lines of thought stemming from different contexts. In its current form, however, the reader is left with a somewhat ambivalent impression.

References

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