

## **Multilingualism Is a Humanism**

Leyla DAKHLI

**As Umberto Eco once said, “the language of Europe is translation”. In an essay that strikes a political chord, François Ost rises up in defence of the diversity and invincibility of languages. Translation first takes place within an individual language and must free itself from the myth of the single language.**

As its title indicates, François Ost’s book is a defence plea. Yet it is not just another of the increasingly common and controversial treatises against “global English” on behalf of minority languages. It is a detailed consideration of the language(s) that should be spoken in the world in order to respond to our desire for the universal whilst feeding on our diversity. François Ost painstakingly traces the genealogy of this translation paradigm almost step by step: from Babel to the question of Law, from linguistic utopias to examples of multilingual states, and from the reinvention of Hebrew to the difference between languages that have disappeared and those that are dead.

Nor is this book a treatise on linguistics. It combines an analysis of languages and their lives with a reflection on standards. In order to make a choice between chaotic plurality and the myth of mutual understanding through linguistic unity, it demonstrates that the single language is an impoverishment, a path to doom, whether we call it “linguistic rectitude” or “language of communication”; while multilingual chaos brings about heuristic misunderstandings – indeed, impossibilities. It compares the dream of the single language with that of the single code or universal law, both of which are fantastical.

This demand – which immediately becomes political – distances the work from straightforward linguistic matters concerning translation; it situates the book firmly within a demand which is then applied to our modern societies and, more specifically, to Europe. Here lies the book’s originality. Although it broadly discusses earlier, well-known research carried out on these subjects, this is recontextualised methodically and precisely. To fully appreciate this work one must follow its course patiently.

### **A Babel of Languages!**

Firstly, we must stop lamenting the age of the single language. By comparing translations of the Babel myth, Ost proposes that we cease to consider the myth as a curse and, instead, choose to make a jubilant interpretation of the plurality of languages, under the auspices of Borges and Kafka. As well as criticising the single language, he also targets the single law, for the two utopias are often concomitant. The desire for a single language corresponds to the desire for a single order, a legal system of pure logic.

Ost’s subject of interest is not only translation between languages but also translation within individual languages themselves and their intrinsic capacity to say things in a thousand different ways. Translation becomes a means of knowing one’s own language, of freeing it from univocality, of enriching it. Language is as much what is secret as what is said; it is the in-between, the half-tones, the capacity to say something other than what is real. The quest for the universal language ends in failure: language thus coded, purified, entirely logical, fails to become a universal language – unlike everyday language, which can say anything.

This excursion into Babelian and post-Babelian myths prompts us to posit the “principle of translatability”, following Umberto Eco in his belief that “in any language men can rediscover the spirit, the breath, the scent and the traces of the original multilingualism”<sup>1</sup>.

### **Translation, an Impure Art**

The main focus of the book is the act of translation, beginning with a return to its meaning. Translation, the paradoxical act of reconstruction, transference, betrayal and reinvention, raises the

---

<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco, *La recherche de la langue parfaite dans la culture européenne*, Seuil “Faire l’Europe”, 1994. (Translator’s note: quotation is own English translation from the French)

question of responsibility more than that of accuracy: “On the transfer spectrum, translation occupies the middle ground between servile copying and free adaptation” (p.129). A “scale of liberties” is played out there, balancing the effects of hybridisation, harmonisation, standardisation against those of rejection, censoring, denaturation.

This same scale of liberties can be found within each individual language, which can itself be translated. Making such a statement does not imply drowning translation in general indistinction, but simply understanding that, strictly speaking, translation could not take place if it were not possible to translate each language itself, be it only between different historical states of that same language. Both versions interlock yet are specific, with translation serving as an archetype. Translation, therefore, always pre-exists within a living language. Here the author supports his argument with a quote from a recent work by Dr Heller-Roazen, for whom a language “lasts only as long as it changes”<sup>2</sup>, and well-known writers exiled within their own language, such as Franz Kafka: Jewish without Yiddish, Czech without the Czech language, an exile in the German language.

Faced with what might be considered a utopia – that of generalised translation – François Ost decides to present “Objections”: firstly, untranslatability; secondly, the always lesser, “second-hand” nature of a translation in relation to the original; lastly, the desire to reduce the act of translation to an act of lexical reduction (substituting one word for another). These arguments end in an ode to the untranslatable; a questioning of our veneration of “the original” through a reflection on self-translation – like that of Joyce translating *Finnegan’s Wake* in Tuscany, or Beckett retranslating his work into English – and, finally, a return to a theory on language. Ost, like Eco, chooses the “language-encyclopaedia” over the “language-dictionary”; for theirs unfolds into a never-ending plurality of meanings and risks misunderstandings in order to enrich itself.

In keeping with the theory of the language-encyclopaedia, the aim of translation is to “reconstruct, in the target language, a text that is as rich in interpretative possibilities as the source language” (p.234) and not merely reconstruct one’s own interpretation as a reader, or what one presumes to be the author’s intention. It is also about making the work accessible in another language while respecting its “foreignness”, which inevitably leads to a distortion of the target

---

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Echolalias. Essai sur l’oubli des langues*, Seuil “Librairie du XXIe siècle”, 2007. (English quotation taken from the original work *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language*, Zone Books, 2008).

language. The translator becomes, in turn, a trafficker, a trader, a writer. He weighs up, compares, negotiates. He does not identify what is similar but, rather, takes a lateral view and tries to “see how”, to see “from this angle”<sup>3</sup>. Finally, the translator’s art is one of abduction, of passing from the known to the unknown: he must “borrow” a law from elsewhere if he is to solve the mystery; it is a wager, a betrayal in order to be faithful.

This analysis allows us to pit a logic of the gift and of hospitality against that of a mere “fair’s fair” exchange of words. Ost borrows from Benjamin’s text (*The Task of the Translator*)<sup>4</sup>; but he distances himself from it in order to reject the quest for purity, which he sees as a “pre-Babelian” fanstasy. He goes on to develop a seductive theory of translation as an “erotic” act, praising translations that “leave something to be desired” (p. 273-274).

### **Envisaging a Politics of Translation**

The author then begins his political and contemporary reflection. “In a post-Babelian world, it is not languages, values or knowledge that are lacking but, rather, the principles of composition that could harmonise and organise them into a hierarchy. In other words, a generalised capacity to translate, if we agree, at least, to reject both the irreducible dispersal into a series of languages and cultures that cannot be measured against one another, and our alignment with a single, dominant language that would quickly stifle all the others” (p. 281). The translation ethic is held up as a collective rule of living. Everything that has been said about the translation profession and the act of translation affords us a greater understanding of the way in which this ethic can claim to be a “third way between the single language (and thought) on the one hand, and the withdrawal into individual languages on the other” (p. 289). It implies recognising the other as another (and not as an alter ego); rediscovering hospitality behind hostility, rather than the traditional faithfulness expected of the translator; rethinking what is universal (as opposed to the objection that, if we place too much emphasis on differences, we endanger the universal – the only possibility for a modern ethico-political rule). Translating already implies some understanding of one another. This moral reflection pushes Umberto Eco’s saying to its limit: “The language of Europe is translation”<sup>5</sup>, since it is a

---

<sup>3</sup> Ost refers to the work of Marcel Détiéne, *Comparer l’incomparable*, Seuil “Librairie du XXIe siècle”, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> I should also mention the republication of Antoine Berman’s commentary entitled *L’Âge de la traduction. “La tâche du traducteur” de Walter Benjamin, un commentaire*, PU Vincennes, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> A recent book lends a fictional dimension to this statement. Cf. Camille de Toledo, *Le Hêtre et le Bouleau. Essai sur la tristesse européenne*, Seuil “Librairie du XXIe siècle”, 2009. Cf. in particular p. 171, final part: “L’utopie linguistique ou

political statement for which a concrete form must be found.

This policy is then developed further. Ost traces the genealogy of the links between states, languages and translation (“the politics of Babel”); here I shall only mention the French revolutionaries’ desire to eradicate local dialects, despite having once supported them: “federalism and superstition speak low Breton; emigration and hatred of the Republic speak German; the counter-revolution speaks Italian; and fanaticism speaks Basque” (Barère report, 1791). The desire to rationalise, to fix the language in order to fix the revolution itself, entailed correcting anomalies, standardising spelling, banning exceptions and developing neologisms. Ost also lingers over the Belgian situation, the reinvention of Hebrew and its coincidence with a national project, as well as the Swiss and Canadian models. His discussion of the relationship between language and national identity lead us to reflect on the way in which nation/integration can be linked to language. The French news is there to remind us of the extent to which the connection between “national identity” and the mother tongue can become propaganda tools (the debate on national identity launched by Eric Besson, or the 2004 Benisti Report linking a foreign mother tongue with delinquency). Within the logic of his conception of translation, Ost posits a model for integration based on a recognition of individual identities within a national whole. He then refers to the work of Charles Taylor, stating that if the mother tongue is part of national identity then it cannot simply be a matter of self-affirmation but also one of external – in particular, national – recognition.

Finally, the focus shifts to Europe. What conception of language is prevalent in Europe? If we consider language to be a “strategic code for communication”, then it can be reduced to a single, simpler idiom. We thus join the revolutionary struggle for clarity or, in a more modern sense, for communication. And yet, if we believe that language is not just for communicating information, if we consider that language itself, as a tool for mediation, is impoverished when it becomes a “service” language, then languages must be kept alive; that is, maintained as languages “of culture”. Ost’s *Défense et Illustration* is compelling. It is enriched by an insightful reflection on language, territory, and connections between languages. It is also a fine analysis of Europe and its future. Ost then moves on to a discussion of science. He tackles the question of the diversity of languages in research, an area in which a diversity of thought is clearly required. To support his reasoning, he

---

la pédagogie du vertige”.

quotes a physicist, Jean-Marc Levy-Leblond, one of those “hardcore” scientists who, according to common sense, would not need languages to understand each other: “for want of becoming multilingual, science runs the risk of aphasia” (p.373). It is in his account of English-speaking researchers’ reflections on the impoverishment of their language – now a “service” language” – and on the resultant homogenisation of thought that his argument finds its real strength. I wager that this appeal to a European – and global – society, founded on translation, will be heard and acted upon.

Translated from French by **Susannah Dale**

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009

© [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr)

### **Further Reading :**

Additional publications (among other recent works published in French)

Gisèle Sapiro (dir.), *L'espace intellectuel en Europe. De la formation des Etats-nations à la mondialisation XIXè-XXIè siècles*, La Découverte, 2009 and *Translatio. Le marché de la traduction en France à l'heure de la mondialisation*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2008.

Jocelyne Dakhlia, *Lingua Franca. Histoire d'une langue partagée en Méditerranée*, Actes Sud, 2008.

Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Echolalies. Essai sur l'oubli des langues*, Seuil « Librairie du XXIe siècle », 2007.

Links:

Société européenne des auteurs : <http://www.seasea.org/en/>

On multilingualism in Europe:

Café Babel, le magazine européen : <http://www.cafebabel.fr/>

Transeuropéenne, Building a trans-European public sphere:

<http://www.transeuropeennes.eu/index.html>

See also the interview with S. Friedländer and P.-E. Dauzat in La Vie des idées

<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Langue-des-bourreaux-langue-des.html>.

