

Teaching and Translation

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FALSE CHOICES ABOUT TEACHING

If you are looking for a cutting edge diagnosis of contemporary debates over teaching, we recommend John Dewey's *Child and Curriculum* (written in 1902!). Talk of teaching today reveals a pronounced case of the dichotomous thinking that troubled Dewey: on the one side, there is the principled refusal to teach in the name of the creativity and initiative of students; on the other side, there is the teacher who is monologically trying to impose a body of knowledge on passive students. We see this sort of argument in one way, in Paulo Freire; in another way, in Jacques Ranciere.¹ Like Dewey, we argue that there is a third way that avoids the false choice between imposing a teacher's point of view or granting privilege to the student's point of view. It is not the third way of dialogue, or at least not dialogue the way it is sometimes presented: each learning from the other, or a Socratic leading of the student to the teacher's intended conclusions. Rather, we find the ideas of translation and third space to be potentially productive here.

Our aim is to take seriously Thomas Kuhn's concept of "incommensurability" in its literal sense (which seems to have been forgotten): that the teacher and student's perspectives and understandings are not isomorphic; that one cannot be reduced or contained within the other. But this is not the same thing as "mutually incomprehensible," which is the way incommensurability has tended to be used. In the wake of Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and other contemporary theories, the phenomenon of sheer incomprehensibility seems to us to be taken as much more common and typical than it is in fact. We would not say that it never happens, but for us the far more common, and more educationally interesting case, is where some degree of understanding and some degree of misunderstanding occur together. For us, therefore, a useful starting point is the concept of *translation*.

THE DEEP RELATIONSHIP OF TEACHING AND TRANSLATION

At first blush, teaching and translation might seem to be rather different activities. We can imagine moments of collaboration of course: one can teach with translated texts; one can teach the theory and practice of this or that sort of translation; and, one can translate someone's teachings into another language. But here we would like to explore whether there is a more fundamental relationship between these two concepts. One way into this question is to note a striking similarity in the sort of debates that arise in each sphere.

Consider first the classic dilemma about translation. Is fidelity to the original possible and desirable? Or does translation inevitably involve a fresh invention, inspired by but distinct from the original? Those in the first camp will concede that there is no such thing as a perfect translation, that choices must be made entailing losses of accuracy, nuance, rhythm, tone, and so forth. But they will add that faithfulness to the original remains a regulative ideal motivating us to minimize such

losses. Those in the second camp will reply that this greatly underestimates the power of language and context to shape thought, meaning, and style. To think of translation as a slightly flawed process of conservation is to risk treating the translated text as both more and less than it is: more, because we wrongly think it gives us the original; less, because we do not appreciate the ways in which the translation represents a fresh creation, a novel response to or interpretation of the original.

Now consider the equivalent situation in education. Modern educational discourse — from the publication of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* in 1762 if not sooner — has revolved around a single dilemma. Dewey, who in 1902 could already speak of it as a long-entrenched problematic, called it the battle of the child and the curriculum. On the side of the curriculum are the so-called traditionalists. For them, the starting point is the logic of the subject matter. The goal of teaching is to pass on the subject matter as fully and faithfully as possible. Philip Jackson for one characterizes this view as “mimetic,” stressing the process of imitation by which a student comes to possess knowledge (or skills) already possessed by the teacher.² On the side of the child are the so-called progressives. For them the starting point is the psychology of the learner. The goal of teaching is to facilitate meaningful discovery. A successful process of learning leads to novel insights and idiosyncratic interpretations as each learner makes sense of the material within the context of their own experience. Traditionalists fault progressive education for lack of rigor; progressives fault traditional education for lack of relevance.

What we point out is how close this educational dilemma is to the central problematic of translation. In each we find a tension between accurate reproduction and fresh creation, between rigor and relevance. Teachers and translators alike wrestle with how to make the material speak in a new context without betraying or cheapening it. Interestingly, this suggests that the true translator is also a teacher and the true teacher also a translator. A translator who translates literally fails to communicate in the new context. Thus, the translator is never only a decoder, but also always a teacher: she teaches her readers how to read the text. A teacher who presents material in its purity, as a series of internal relations, fails to reach students. Thus, the teacher must also be a translator, finding points of connection between the world of the text or subject and the lived worlds of students.

UNDERSTANDING, MISUNDERSTANDING, AND UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENTLY

A naïve view of translation is based on the idea that translating one language into another is a simple matter of finding equivalent words and phrases from the target language and mapping them onto the original: in Spanish, “perro” for “dog,” for example. But because languages are large systems of meaning, feeling, and connotation, there is never a simple equivalence or one-to-one mapping: translating something always means *changing* it. In the apparently simple case just given, “perro” is a gendered noun (versus “perra”) and so refers to a *male* dog. English, of course, doesn’t make such distinctions in most of its nouns. And so invoking the Spanish term is not just a matter of identical denotation (even if it is the “same” dog): it immediately invokes broader cultural and historical content. And this is a

relatively simple instance, compared to translating, say, “What a piece of work is a man!” (*Hamlet*). Finding equivalences across cultures and concepts is not a matter of one-to-one correspondences but one of rethinking material from a new standpoint.

A useful illustration of this point comes from a well-known problem that arose when translating *Alice in Wonderland* from English into French. The translator had many challenges in capturing the puns that run throughout Lewis Carroll’s text. In one passage, Alice says to the Queen of Hearts, “The earth takes 24 hours to turn on its axis” — to which the Queen replies, “Speaking of axes, off with her head!” The translator’s solution to the problem was to change Alice’s statement to “The earth takes 24 hours to make one revolution” — to which the Queen replies, “Speaking of Revolution, off with her head!” (An equivalency that would make particular sense in the French context, but not in others.) The point of the example is that sometimes one needs to change the meaning through a translation in order to adapt it to a different cultural or historical context; judging the effectiveness of the translation partly depends on determining what the point and effect of the passage ought to be, and then finding an alternative but similar way of gaining the same effect. It has little to do with finding an exact literal match.

Once one accepts that translation is as much a process of changing as it is of preserving meaning (that is, it is a process of interpretation and not just semantic mapping), then issues of understanding and misunderstanding come to the fore. In fact it is never possible to understand something exactly — nor is it possible to misunderstand something completely. Understanding and misunderstanding always happen together, in different measures and to different degrees. We often say things like, “You have understood me perfectly!” or “You do not understand me at all!” But both versions are incorrect: we never understand anything perfectly, or exactly; but also, significantly, even misunderstanding depends on some degree of understanding (otherwise, it could not even be characterized as misunderstanding — it would just be gibberish).

Reading or listening are clearly active, interpretive processes, and not only passive processes of signal processing and reception; like translating, they involve changing, rethinking what is read or heard in terms that make it comprehensible to one’s self. And this inevitably entails adding to, and losing, something from the original. Our efforts at understanding a person, an event, or a text, are pragmatic achievements: something is always gained and something is always missed. “It is enough to say,” Hans-Georg Gadamer remarks, that “we understand in a *different way if we understand at all*.”⁷³ While we refer to understanding and misunderstanding, then, it would be better to speak of more and less productive (mis)understandings. Such productive misunderstandings might be intentional or inadvertent. Something more or less is understood than might have been intended, and in this creative reinterpretation the possibility of new knowledge, and new insights, occurs — for both the reader or listener and the original speaker or text.

Let us look at the other side of this relation: sometimes, as is often the case of teaching, we are not simply speaking, but trying to translate *ourselves* in terms that

can be understood by the student. We are framing, explaining, elaborating what we intend to say in ways that try to anticipate what we think the student already knows and understands. Teaching, it might be said, is *a process of translation within the same language*.⁴ And so, the processes of change happen twice in the teaching–learning relation: first on the side of the teacher, reformulating intended meanings and information with an eye (or an ear) toward how it will be heard; and then again on the side of the student, as whatever the teacher says is transformed again to the knowledge schemas, vocabulary, interests, and understandings of the student.

Kris Gutierrez recounts a story about teaching *Brown v. Board of Education*.⁵ She was telling her students at length about the impact “Brown” had on racial identity and aspirations: Brown raised hope, it gave black identity a public presence on the national stage, and so on. As her students responded, she realized that they thought she was talking about James Brown and had been translating everything she was saying about *Brown v. Board* into statements about the great soul music performer. Of course this was, on a literal level, a misunderstanding. But in mistaking “Brown” the students were taking up Gutierrez’ pedagogical proffer and developing it in an interesting if unforeseen direction. What emerged was an account of hope, identity, and struggle that neither the teacher nor her students would have been able to articulate on their own. Gutierrez describes this as a “third space” phenomenon: new meanings are created making this educational moment potentially productive for teacher and student alike.⁶

One might wonder whether this implies that every misunderstanding amounts to a profound new creation. Surely not, but the key is to see that we can only assess the productivity of (mis)understanding after the fact. The question becomes: what emerged from this way of getting an idea across, or from this way of taking it in and perhaps mis-taking it in certain ways? Does the theme play out fully? Does the translation result in insights into the subject? This pragmatic view of teaching as translation not only shifts the question from one of accuracy to one of fecundity, but it shifts our focus from the spatial question (where is the locus of control, teacher or student?) to the temporal one of what happens over time in the play of (mis)understandings.

TOWARD A DIACHRONIC MODEL OF TEACHING AND TRANSLATION

We can sum up our progress so far as good news and bad news. The good news is that we have found an interesting isomorphism between translation and teaching. The bad news is that what unites them appears to be the insoluble problem in which either rigor or relevance must be sacrificed. We find ourselves, therefore, in a tricky position. When facing an ordinary problem, what we lack is the solution. In this case, what we have are two bad solutions (teaching–translating as mimesis or as invention). What we lack is a genuinely productive problematic. But we now have a promising lead in the notion of temporality, one that promises to help us revise one of the founding conventions of the dichotomous models of teaching and translation. Consider the word “translation” itself, the roots of which signify a carrying *across* of meaning. And this same idea shows up in one of the terms we considered in the discussion of teaching: “transmission” or sending *across*. Both teaching and

translation, in other words, are seen in spatial terms, as a precarious transfer of meaning from one place to another.

To bring out the temporal dimensions of teaching as translation — to trade our insoluble synchronic problem for a generative, diachronic problematic — we now turn to Gadamer. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer sets out to rescue the arts and humanities from their fate in scientific modernity.⁷ What's interesting is the similarity between our problem about teaching as translation and the one Gadamer works through in his discussion of interpretation. Imagine that you are reading a poem or play or novel, or standing before a painting or sculpture. What does it mean, you wonder. A thought presents itself, but immediately the question arises whether this meaning is really in the text or is something you are projecting onto the text. Notice that here we are still operating with a spatial metaphor and once again prone to seesaw between untenable extremes. The choice between subjectivism and objectivism in interpretation is parallel with those between conservation and innovation in teaching and translation.

To get out of this epistemological impasse, Gadamer proposes an excursus into ontology. What is the being of a work of art, he asks. And here is where time comes into the equation. Gadamer's question is: How does the art work, or more broadly the traditional text — arias and autobiographies, laws and letters, monuments and moral theories, sermons and sonnets — exist in time? Does it exist most fully in its moment of creation and then suffer a loss of reality over time, like a radioactive isotope? Or is there a better way to conceptualize this?

At first glance, the temporal shift does not seem to eliminate the problem of interpretive distance. Not only does the physical support of each text or work decay, but temporal distance can also be seen as the source of other types of distortion. Consider our mistaken impression that Ancient Greek buildings were snowy white, suggesting restraint, purity, and austerity, attributes we wove into our general ideas about classicism. The only problem: it turns out that Greek buildings and statuary were typically painted with multiple, bright pigments that weather has long ago stripped away. At first glance, then, shifting to the temporal axis does not seem to help us. When we are closer to the source, we are in a better position to know the truth of the text. Over time, distortions and misreadings multiply.

To deal with this objection, Gadamer proposes to look for an alternative ontology of the work of art by focusing first on a subcategory of the arts, the performing arts. Here, he suggests, something important about the being of the work of art becomes more visible than in other branches of the arts. When we consider interpretation in music and theater we notice something interesting. Interpretation enters into the process before the artwork reaches its audience. The work of music is not the score nor is the play already there in the script. Conductors and musicians, directors, actors, set designers, and costumers are needed to complete the work. There is a work of interpretation, but this does not mean projecting subjective impressions onto something that was more real before they did so. They are seeking to *realize* the work. They must enter into a close, careful, and imaginative dialogue

with the work to understand what it has to say, how to bring this script or score to life.

But of course, they are not asking this question in a vacuum. They are asking how they can bring it to life for the audience for which they will perform it. Here theater provides the most potent metaphor. The audience represents the fourth wall of the theater. They stand not outside the work looking in but along with the writer, director, technical crew, they help to determine what is played. Thus, rather than conceive of the work as a thing approached from the outside by this or that interpreter, we are beginning to see it as *process*, a process which draws in interlocutors whose perspective becomes a part of the work.

With this maneuver, Gadamer gives himself some important wiggle room. For, now, we may ask an interesting variant of the historicism/presentism question. What happens when a twenty-first-century troupe readies a performance of *Hamlet*? Their job is to make the text speak to their audience. A (turn of the) seventeenth-century rendering of the play is neither possible nor desirable. But neither is their goal a twenty-first-century communication that is not the play. This troupe is not some latter-day critic imposing twenty-first-century prejudices on a seventeenth-century text, and yet it cannot be denied that they have their twenty-first-century prejudices. However, they do not stand outside the play. They can reify the script and the production history if they choose, treating these as distantiated objects of reflection. But the *play* is an unfolding event of tradition in which they participate. The script was completed somewhere between 1599 and 1601, but the play is not yet complete. It continues to teach and learn new things as it draws in new interlocutors.

Indeed, Shakespeare was himself participating in an unfolding tradition. The writing of *Hamlet* was not the inaugural moment in this diachronic, traditionary event. We can say that in writing *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was himself creating an occasional object, asking how to make the *Saxo Grammaticus* or *Ur-Hamlet* speak to his contemporaries. Thus, the typical model of aesthetic reception is misleading. It suggests that we are talking about a work when it is more accurate to say that we are in dialogue with the work *about its subject*. Something about sanity and madness, procrastination and action, fathers and sons, representation and reality, and so on is playing itself out in the writing of *Hamlet*, and continues to play itself out in its many, varied performances, and in the response by diverse audiences.

Through this exploration of the medial sense of interpretation in the performing arts, Gadamer develops an alternative ontology of the traditionary text. To engage a work of culture is to participate in an event, in the play of tradition. This means that understanding is always understanding differently. But this does not mean that there was an original and now we project various personal or cultural or epochal biases onto the true text. The traditionary text itself has a diachronic existence. It is built to travel, to meet new interlocutors, and to develop over time.

It is important to note that in this model, misreadings are still possible. Indeed, the temporal reading of interpretation immediately gives us two categories with which to understand misreading. Readings may be historicist or presentist,

depending on whether it is the text or the reader's context that drops out, deactivating the dialogic energy that makes art vital. Or we could now turn this rubric back on the horizontal axis, and note that this I-Thou model applies not only to historical distance. Liberal learning is so difficult precisely because our readings of texts can so easily lapse into academicism, in which details of the text are acknowledged but as if they exist in another world sealed off from our own, and self-confirmation in which we see in the text only that confirms our sense of what's what. Notice that in either variation, the claim of the text to offer a genuine alternative view on a matter of common concern is suspended. To drop yourself out of the dialogue is just another way of not really listening.

By aligning teaching with translation and reorienting both on the temporal axis, we have seen why talk of incommensurability is out of place. A translated text is not reduced to another, or made identical through a series of isomorphic equivalencies. This relation is always mediated through processes of interpretation: interpretations that, in turn, open up further understandings. That there is a judgment here, and not a simple yes or no answer, is a consequence of the kind of pragmatism we bring to this question. That it is a diachronic answer means that history, context, and the possibility of further development are all relevant to the judgment we make at the moment. And that time and development are relevant, in this account, means education and learning are central dimensions of deciding when misunderstandings are productive or not: part of what "productive" means here is opening up (as opposed to closing down) a capacity for further understandings. What might seem simply a "mistake" or "getting it wrong," within a narrow framework of judgment, might need to be re-evaluated if a misunderstanding, or only partially correct understanding, actually provides resources in developing a new or better understanding. In fact, educators make these kinds of judgments all the time, and we all have experience with when a student's "wrong" answer tells us something important about them — or about us — or when it might lead to an unexpected new line of inquiry. In this sense, teachers need to be pragmatists.

CONCLUSION

We began by noticing a strong isomorphism between the activities of teaching and translation. The teacher is ultimately a translator and the translator ultimately a teacher (perhaps it is clearer simply to say that both are interpreters). But here is precisely where we must follow Gadamer. For we must think our way past the spatial model and its ontological assumption of an original and a facsimile. This leaves us facing an untenable choice between rigor and relevance, conservation and innovation, truth and meaning. The temporal model we have been rehearsing reminds us that apparently synchronic acts of teaching and translation are also diachronic acts, interventions in developing traditions.

When William Gass translates the *Duino Elegies* from German to English, it is not wrong to say that he is attempting to carry over Rilke's meaning from one natural language to another.⁸ It is not wrong to say that in so doing, Gass is paving the way for a new set of readers to encounter Rilke. But these points can serve to obscure the fact that Gass's activity is closely related to that of the critic and indeed of any serious

reader. He is trying to understand the poem, and this means understanding what it says, and this means understanding what it says to *us* in *our* lifeworlds. In this way, he not only helps the poem survive into a new century, but, among other of the *Elegies*' interlocutors and participants, helps it reveal more of its aspects than were or could have been apparent in 1920 (or 1950 or 1980). As long as it has serious readers, serious translators, the poem continues "to tradition," to come down, to become.

When a teacher teaches *Hamlet*, it is not wrong to say that she is trying to communicate something of Shakespeare's imaginative vision to her differently situated and minded students. But again, there is a crucial addendum. The text is not finished. In teaching a text, we participate in the ongoing diachronic event that it represents. It is through teaching the text — if our pedagogy rises to the level of a serious engagement — that we continue to discover what this imaginative vision encompasses.

In teaching and translating, we are performing and reforming tradition. We are not reproducing authentic or inauthentic copies but participating in the ongoing development of a line of thought, re-opening a vein of meaning, responding to a call that demands a response.

1. See, for example, Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (1973) (New York: Continuum, 2000); and Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

2. Philip W. Jackson, "The Mimetic and the Transformative: Alternative Outlooks on Teaching," in *The Practice of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986), 115–45.

3. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (1960) (New York: Continuum, 2004), 296 (emphasis in original).

4. Compare Alison Cook-Sather, *Education Is Translation: A Metaphor for Change in Learning and Teaching* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 37.

5. Kris Gutierrez, Betsy Rymes, and Joanne Larson, "Script, Counterscript, and Underlife in the Classroom: James Brown Versus Brown v. Board of Education," *Harvard Educational Review* 65, no. 3 (1995): 445–72.

6. The concept of "third space" comes from Homi Bhabha. See Homi K. Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi K. Bhabha," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 207–21.

7. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. In what follows, we rehearse the argument of Part I, Section 2, 102–71.

8. See William H. Gass, *Reading Rilke: Reflections on the Problems of Translation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).