Theory and Other Languages

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I first became convinced of the value of working with other languages during my PhD research. I was working on Foucault's historical approach, and was frustrated that, at the time, his book *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* was only partially translated into English, as *Madness and Civilisation*. One passage in particular was important, because this was the passage on Descartes that Derrida criticized in 'Cogito and the History of Madness'. I bought a copy of the pocket *Tel* edition in Paris, and found the relevant passage. This was one of the first things I had read in French since my school years, and I needed some considerable help. I had a French girlfriend at the time, and was spending a lot of time at her home in the Alps. It was around this time that I became aware of Colin Gordon's argument that *Histoire de la folie* was 'an unknown book by Michel Foucault'. I became convinced that it was going to be difficult to make the kind of argument I wanted to make about Foucault without taking some of these untranslated texts into account. In addition, it was clear that checking the English passages I was quoting back to the original would improve the argument. It was that latter process which really helped to improve my French reading skills. Reading a passage in parallel to a polished published translation would help considerably with vocabulary and style. Over the next few visits to France I picked up copies of all of Foucault's works, including the recently published *Dits et écrits*. There were a huge number of untranslated texts in these four volumes, many of which remain that way more than twenty years later. Aside from the full text of *Histoire de la folie*, working with *Dits et écrits* was probably the most significant text for my work with Foucault.

So, what did this initial use of French add to the work I was doing? First, and probably most important, it gave me access to a range of texts which were not available in English translation. Foucault's Collège de France lectures were now beginning to appear and it took a few years before each was translated into English. Second, it allowed me check existing translations to the original, which helped to shape the arguments I was making in multiple ways. I do not mean to suggest that the published translations were 'wrong', but that even the best were compromises, forced to make choices from the multiple possibilities, and that as well as losing some of the resonances of the French original, they were also introducing other senses that were not there in the French. In addition, checking all translations helped to see where there might be inconsistencies between translations, and especially between translators. Third, I was able, tentatively at first and later with more confidence, to read the French secondary literature on Foucault. Debates there were noticeably different to English-language ones, with different emphases, texts discussed and connections. I also began to read works by some of Foucault's colleagues and interlocutors.

Given that I was now seeing French as integral to my research on Foucault, it was increasingly clear to me that I needed to follow a similar line with the other two thinkers I was treating in the thesis: Nietzsche and Heidegger. My German was, and remains, poor, but again by checking every translation to the original it became possible to make claims that were simply not possible before. We still do not have a complete English translation of Nietzsche's notebooks, although the Stanford University Press translation on the Colli and Montari edition inches slowly forward. While substantially more Heidegger has appeared in both German and English translation, much of the latter was not available in English in the mid 1990s. Fortunately some key texts for my argument – notably the 1934-35 lecture course on Hölderlin – were available in French translation, so I used that to help me read the German. (The Hölderlin course has now, nearly twenty years later, finally been published in English.)

In the submitted PhD thesis, which was effectively a first draft of my first book*Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of a Spatial History*, I was therefore able to refer back to the original language or use

original language sources for all quotations. By the end of the process I felt confident enough to begin to modify existing translations in my quotations, as I said, "to ensure readability, consistency, and particularly to allow emphasis on the spatial language used". The last aspect was important: I wouldn't fault the translators here, but my thesis was about space, and some of the language which was crucial to *my* argument was lost in the published translations. Indeed, one of the things that this work underlined, perhaps above all else, was a great deal of respect for the people that do this work of translation. I would agonize over a passage which I was translating for my purposes – an accurate, but necessarily partial rendering of a single part – whereas the translators had to try to render the whole, consistently, and for as wide a range of readers as possible.

It was toward the end of the PhD that a chance encounter at a conference sparked some productive future work. I had presented on Heidegger, but was overheard making a passing comment about Henri Lefebvre by Eleonore Kofman – one of the conference keynotes. Lefebvre was someone who I had worked on extensively during the PhD period, though the material I wrote did not go into the final thesis. The conversation at the conference led to an invitation to join Eleonore and Elizabeth Lebas on the follow-up to their Lefebvre collection *Writings on Cities*. Together we worked on what became *Key Writings*. Even today only a fraction of Lefebvre's voluminous writings exist in English, but it was far fewer then, and so we divided up his work and began selecting sections of the book. We employed a professional translator, but I extensively edited the texts I was sent, and so learned valuable skills in producing a translation. I also took it upon myself to complete Lefebvre's footnotes, which was a major task and one I have felt essential to all future volumes I've worked on in this way. Trying to find an unreferenced Hegel passage in German or English, when quoted in Lefebvre's own French translation, is a major challenge, but certainly helps improve your language skills.

So, by the early 2000s, I had decent knowledge of French for my academic work, and just about passable German. Both languages would be extensively used in my next writings – a book on Lefebvre and one on Heidegger. Even at this stage I knew that I wanted to write a book on the question of territory, and its emergence within Western political thought, and was beginning to sketch out the contours of this work. It would run in parallel with those other books, and one on *Terror and Territory*, for several years, until I finally turned to it full-time in 2008. This was the work that became the book *The Birth of Territory*. For that project, I knew that it would be essential to pay close attention to the languages of the texts I was using. If you read Plato's *Laws*, Aristotle's *Politics* or Caesar's *The Gallic War*, for example, the word 'territory' will appear all over the place, but it isn't at all clear that the same thing is implied by the word as our modern concept, or even that the English word accurately captures the words being used in Greek or Latin. So, as I began this work, I made a point of checking everything back to the original again. With many classical texts this is helped enormously by the parallel language editions that exist, of which the Loeb library is the most famous. Even if I preferred a different translation to the Loeb, the Loeb would help me find where to look. And in doing so I discovered lots of interesting things. In Greek, for instance, the term commonly translated as 'territory' is *khora*, which has an everyday, unstressed sense of land or countryside, alongside its more philosophical sense in Plato's *Timaeus*. In addition, even though our English word 'territory' derives from the Latin *territorium*, that is an extremely rare word in classical Latin. Instead, terms such as *agris*, *fines* and *terra* were the more common terms for land and political claims.

That was an initial insight that helped me to realize the importance of language to what I was doing. As I developed the work over the next several years, it became an essential part of the research process. As the project developed, so too did the languages with which I was forced to work. I would stress that with the majority there were perfectly serviceable English translations, indeed sometimes multiple translations, and I used these to help me locate the key passages in the original texts. But as well as French, German, Latin and ancient Greek, I ended up using Italian, Spanish, Anglo-Saxon, and Dutch sources. Sometimes there were interesting things thrown up by the process. In almost every instance I discovered something worthwhile in consulting the original. Some writers such as Descartes and Hobbes wrote major texts both in Latin and French or English editions. Comparing these helped to shed light on how they saw the parallels, or tensions, between concepts in different languages. Other writers, such as Leibniz, wrote in multiple languages, sometimes on the same topic. I made extensive use of a French presentation of arguments he originally made in Latin, for example, in tracking how he saw the relation between forms of political power and their spatial extent. He also, occasionally, wrote in German, and was aware of the political-legal debates in that language. It really helped me to see how Leibniz was bringing together different strands of thought. The

arguments I make about the connection between Italian Roman law debates in the fourteenth century, disputes in the seventeenth century Holy Roman Empire, and a challenge to Bodin's equation of majesty with sovereignty, all came from this work in multiple languages.

Bodin was another intriguing example. His *Six livres de la république* was originally written in French in 1576. He then produced a Latin version *De republica libri sex* ten years later. But the Latin was not a simple translation: he cut some passages, added some, and amended others. An English translation as *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale* was made in 1606, but this was neither of the French or Latin alone, but a fusion of the two into a new whole, along with some creative choices. Scholarship on Bodin stressed that neither the Latin nor the French alone were sufficient to work on his ideas, so I began a process of working with both. In addition, there were marginal notes in relation to the text that could only be found in an Italian critical edition. Bodin didn't use the Latin words I anticipated to render French terms, and the English edition sometimes used unexpected vocabulary. I came to realize that the English text, while not necessarily a good translation of Bodin, was extremely important for shaping the vocabulary of English political thought of the period. I tried in the book to analyze the relation between word, concept and practice, using not just a Foucauldian-inspired genealogical approach but taking into account Reinhart Kosellecks's arguments about *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history) and Quentin Skinner's arguments about contextual history. Many of the arguments I make in *The Birth of Territory* would simply not have been possible without that attention to language.

My ongoing work relates to these concerns in multiple ways. Alongside the authored books mentioned above I have worked on several translation projects, mainly with books by Henri Lefebvre, but also Kostas Axelos and Michel Foucault. On Lefebvre's book *Rhythmanalysis* I worked with Gerald Moore, who produced a first draft of the translation after we had agreed on the key terminological choices. I then edited his translation, wrote an introduction and did the notes. A similar process was used for the *State, Space, World* collection with Neil Brenner, with Gerald again working on the translations that Neil and I edited. Gerald also did some translations for the *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography* collection I edited with Jeremy Crampton, and it has generally been a trend of my edited collections to include some newly translated texts wherever possible. These might be by the author whose work is the focus of the collection, such as the essay included as the final chapter in *Sloterdijk Now*, or texts by commentators in other languages: *Reading Kant's Geography*, for example, includes texts by Kant's German editor and French translator. More recently I have acted as editor of translations of Axelos's *Introduction to a Future Way of Thought: On Marx and Heidegger* and Lefebvre's *Metaphilosophy.* Translations make possible appropriations, can be useful for teaching, and perhaps also act as a bridge for those, like me, who will check back to the original even as they utilize them.

In addition I am currently working on two books on Foucault for Polity Press. One is entitled *Foucault's Last Decade*, and the other *The Birth of Power*, looking at the period from around 1969 until 1975. Both make extensive use of all the primary materials we now have, including all his lecture courses at the Collège de France, as well as archival materials and some interviews with people who knew and worked with him. The last of the lecture courses has just been published in French, though it and two others are not yet out in English translation. Working with the French therefore gives me access to material earlier, but several other texts of Foucault's remain untranslated. Some of the archival material is in English, because Foucault gave several lectures and interviews in that language during his visits to the United States. But much of the material, including hand-written manuscripts and lecture recordings, is only available in French. The secondary literature and works by his colleagues is often untranslated, and never likely to be so. In these books, as with almost all my work, all references are to both the original language and available translations.

When I have finished this work on Foucault, I want to return to the various materials I have for a book on Shakespeare. I have published an article and a chapter from this work, but have lots of other material that I've given as lectures or at conferences. Shakespeare of course wrote in English, but translation can take place within languages as well as between languages. At one level this can be a simple recognition that words change meanings, some senses becoming obsolete, and others accruing. Editorial glosses can be extremely helpful here, as can seeing the play in performance, preferably multiple times. On another, it can be the recognition that any paraphrase or rewording is itself a translation – literally a carrying-over or carrying-across, with all the baggage that comes with it,

and all that left behind. Translation is always an interpretation; interpretation always a translation. Specifically concerning Shakespeare, many of the skills I have acquired through my work on Foucault, Lefebvre and Heidegger are proving useful in my work here. This includes working with multiple modern editions, textual variants in original printings, taking into account spelling modernization practices and so on. English equally does not have a monopoly on good commentary on Shakespeare.

Umberto Eco's book *How to Write a Thesis* has finally been published in English, almost forty years after its first publication in Italian. Much of the material remains relevant today, even if some of the discussion of referencing practices is rather out of date. One of the things that struck me was his insistence that there were certain types of theses that people could not write without the requisite skills. One of these was to do with language. He put a lot of insistence on working with the original language, especially for theses on literature. If you did not have the language ability, and were unprepared to learn it, then he said you could not write the thesis. I would not necessarily be as strict as Eco here, but there is much in what he says. When I was in a Geography department I would occasionally note that theorists were held to different standards than more field-based researchers. If someone was working on human geography outside of the Anglophone world they would, quite rightly, be required to use or learn the language, or to work with skilled interpreters. You would not expect someone working on German history or politics to be unable to read source material in the original language. So why is theory seen, in some disciplines, to be an exception? Close reading simply cannot be done in translation. While utilizing theory, as is so common today in IR and related disciplines, can potentially be done only on the basis of existing translations, anything more substantive will undoubtedly benefit from attention to the original source. It has certainly made an enormous difference to how I do my own work.

About the author:

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