

The task and function of the translator

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Background

The position on the problem of translation set out by Walter Benjamin in an essay entitled *The task of the translator* and included with his translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens* is widely known: it revolves around the possibility, or rather the necessity, of “really letting yourself be inhabited by various languages”, respecting their differences so as not to “compress” their large number and the internal complexity of each, and to not reduce the dignity of the various different voices with a leniency that risks ending up in assimilation. From this point of view the function of translatability of any work consists of remembering the complementary nature of the single languages, urging the speakers to complete, so to speak, their own language, crossing its borders or accepting overlaps proposed by others (in ‘difficult’ translations) for what they are: acts necessary for the life of that language.

A passage by Rudolf Pannwitz, drawn on and quoted by Benjamin, is particularly explicit and significant on the subject: “Our interpretations, even the best, depart from a false principle, in that they aim at Germanising Indian, Greek and English, instead of Indianising, hellenising or Anglicising German. They have much greater respect for the uses of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign work. The fundamental error of the translator is to keep to the contingent stage of his own language instead of letting it be powerfully roused and stirred up by the foreign language. He should, especially when translating from an ancient language, go back to the last elements of language itself, where word, image and sound merge: he should widen and deepen his own language through the foreign language.”

Seen from this point of view the task of the translator “consists of finding a stance towards the language into which he is translating, that will bring out the echo of the original in it”. The translator, in actual fact, should be in the middle, in the state of *inbetweenness*, as the Canadian School of Translation¹ suggests, perennially passing through, continuously oscillating between different, and often contradictory, places, times and spaces; or should place himself in what Homi Bhabha has defined as the “Third Space”.

This position has been energetically discussed and often criticised: the reasons and sense can be further investigated through a true story, which has Italo Calvino as its protagonist.

1. Marco Polo and Kubla Khan

Calvino himself, at a conference held at Columbia University, New York in March 1983, provided us with the genesis of *Le città invisibili* (Invisible cities), a novel wavering between the philosophical and the fantastic-allegorical tale. Originally it consisted of memories of travels, mostly memories of cities to visit, notes – often poetic – of impressions gained at a given moment,

¹ F. Wah, M. Nourbese Philip, R. Miki, ‘The Years’s Work in English Studies’, vol. 84, n. 1, pp. 945-1020; M. H. A. Blanc, J. F. Hamers, *Bilinguality and Bilingualism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.

in a particular place, depending on the state of mind of the writer. Thus feelings of sad cities and happy cities materialised on paper, cities with starry skies and cities full of garbage, in short spaces, sensations, different peoples and their passions, fixed on the pages, like a diary with free sheets.

“But all these pages still did not make a book”, the author confessed at the same conference. He therefore imagined a great traveller, the greatest in literature, Marco Polo, presenting Kubla Khan, the Emperor of the Tartars, with a series of reports on his journeys to the Far East, each of which introduced by a dialogue in italics between the two. The entire structure of the work thus takes shape in this way and, finally, it comprises fifty-five descriptions of cities, all with the name of a woman. These are subdivided into eleven thematic routes, each of which contains five descriptions of cities.

It is interesting to recall that this work was written by Calvino during the first part (1964-1970) of his long Parisian period and published in 1972. It is interesting because it was indeed at the end of 1964, the 2nd of December to be exact, that Elio Vittorini, Calvino’s friend and first and principal ally in the cultural battle to establish a renewed and closer relationship between Italian literature and science, had presented for the attention of the Einaudi publishing house, for whom both worked, Thomas Kuhn’s book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published two years earlier by the University of Chicago, summarising as follows, as the minutes of the meeting of 2 December 1964 show, the meaning of the work: “The idea is that scientific progress takes place by searching through a world of already known paradigms. It is a puzzle, in short, and goes by examples”. The book was then passed to Ludovico Geymonat for him to read, who gave a very positive opinion of it and it came out in 1969 in the “Paperbacks” collection.

If I recall this episode, it is because, given also the temporal coincidence and the documented interest Calvino had for the works on science, the history of science and scientific popularization proposed to the publishers he collaborated with as a translator, it is not arbitrary to imagine that Kuhn’s work may have had some effect on the drafting of the novel the writer was working on in those years, the *Città invisibili*.

For, as is known, at the centre of the *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is the communication breakdown due to the successive hegemony of different schools, characterised by what Kuhn calls “their incommensurable ways of seeing the world and of practising science in it”.² Following this situation, of which the author provides numerous examples during the course of his analysis, we cannot speak of continuity of the history of these disciplines, whose evolution is in actual fact fragmented and characterised by the presence of “communicative leaps” repeatedly posing difficulties in communication and translation. “No natural history can be interpreted in the absence of at least some implicit body of intertwined theoretical and methodological belief that permits selection, evaluation and criticism. If that body of belief is not already implicit in the collection of facts – in which case more than “mere facts” are at hand – it must be externally supplied, perhaps by a current metaphysic, by another science, or by a personal and historical accident. No wonder, then, that in the early stages of the development of any science men confronting the same range of phenomena, but not usually all the same particular phenomena, describe and interpret them in different ways.”³

In fact, however, this situation is not typical just of the early phases of development of each science. For if we pose, for example, the problem of the relationship between Newtonian and relativist dynamics and ask ourselves if it really is possible to have the first *derive* from the second, we immediately find ourselves faced with the fact that “the physical referents of these Einsteinian concepts are by no means identical with those of the Newtonian concepts that bear the same name”, so “It has not, that is, shown Newton’s Laws to be a limiting case of Einstein’s. For in the passage to the limit it is not only the forms of the laws that have changed. Simultaneously we have had to alter the fundamental structural elements of which the universe to which they apply is composed.

This need to change the meaning of established and familiar concepts is central to the

² Thomas S. Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1962, p. 4.

³ *Ibidem*, 1962, p. 16-17.

revolutionary impact of Einstein's theory".⁴

What this example demonstrates, consequently, is that "the transition from a paradigm in crisis to a new one from which a new tradition of normal science can emerge is far from a cumulative process, one achieved by an articulation or extension of the old paradigm. Rather it is a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reconstruction that changes some of the field's most elementary theoretical generalisations as well as many of its paradigm methods and applications."⁵

The consequences of this situation have been dealt with in an even more explicit way by Kuhn himself in an essay replying to his critics of 1970⁶:

"The point by point comparison of two successive theories demands a language into which at least the empirical consequences of both can be translated without loss or change. That such language lies ready to hand has been widely assumed since at least the seventeenth century when philosophers took the neutrality of pure sensation-reports for granted and sought a 'universal character' which would display all languages for expressing them as one. Ideally the primitive vocabulary of such a language would consist of pure sense-datum terms plus syntactic connectives. Philosophers have now abandoned hope of achieving any such ideal, but many of them continue to assume that theories can be compared by recourse to a basic vocabulary consisting entirely of words which are attached to nature in ways that are unproblematic and, to the extent necessary, independent of theory. That is the vocabulary in which Sir Karl's [Popper's] basic statements are framed. He requires it in order to compare the verisimilitude of alternate theories or to show that one is 'roomier' than (or includes) its predecessor. Feyerabend and I have argued at length that no such vocabulary is available. In the transition from one theory to the next words change their meanings or conditions of applicability in subtle ways. Though most of the same signs are used before and after a revolution – e.g. force, mass, element, compound, cell - the ways in which some of them attach to nature has somehow changed. Successive theories are thus, we say, incommensurable."⁷

For example, the development of Dalton's atomic theory introduces, with respect to the preceding theories elaborated, a new way of seeing chemical combination, with the result that alloys, which before this revolution were considered compounds, begin after it to be seen as mixtures. Theories before and after Dalton therefore give a different slant on the world and chemists do not have at their disposal for their reports neutral sub-linguistic means that can act as a reciprocal comparative element and be adopted as a common base, that acts as a "buffer zone" and "interface" between the theories involved and from which a reliable translation may therefore be made.

In the presence of this state of affairs two responses are possible: the first, that of Feyerabend, consists of acknowledging this immeasurability, considering it a synonym of untranslatability basically, giving in to it; the second is that adopted by Kuhn himself in 1970, based, on the contrary, on the idea that immeasurability in no way means impossibility of dialogue and comparison between theories. With the fading of the illusion that a single foundation of knowledge exists and that the contribution of the various theories may harmonically compose a single "image of the world", coherent and concordant, in his opinion, the hard work of becoming *good translators* from one theory to another has to be affirmed more and more, thus acknowledging the specific contribution each of these, often in competition with others, provides, but not, for that, giving up the need to have them carry on a dialogue and communicate reciprocally. Having acknowledged the fact that researchers may legitimately arrive at different conclusions and evaluations without violating any accepted criterion or any rule, and that this variability of opinion and orientation not only does not hinder scientific progress, but actually stimulates and promotes it, to the point of constituting one of its essential factors, the objective that we pose ourselves is to manage to build a symbolic context of components held together by a background that is accepted, agreed on and

⁴ *Ibidem*, 1962, p. 101.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 1962, p. 84.

⁶ T. S. Kuhn, "Reflections on my Critics", in I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave, *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 266-267.

shared by the entire scientific community.

“Men who experience a break in communication can try, reciprocally, to discover what the other wants to see and say when placed in front of a stimulus to which their visual and verbal response proves different. With time and skill they can become very good at foreseeing reciprocal behaviour, which is what the historian usually learns (or should learn) to do when he deals with the oldest scientific theories.

What the participants in a communication breakdown have then found is, of course, a way to translate each other's theory into his own language and simultaneously to describe the world in which that theory or language applies. Without at least preliminary steps in that direction, there would be no process that one were even attempted to describe as theory - choice. Arbitrary conversion (except that I would doubt the existence of such a thing in any aspect of life) would be all that was involved. Note, however, that the possibility of translation does not make the term ‘conversion’ inappropriate. The absence of a neutral language, the choice of a new theory is a decision to adopt a different native language and to deploy it in a correspondingly different world.”⁸

The novelty and importance of this debate could not escape Calvino, who found himself just at that time at grips with an issue in many ways similar, though removed to a different cultural field. For the choice of inserting notes and thoughts on the “invisible” cities in the dialogue between Kubla Khan and Marco Polo posed a problem of communication that the writer faced and solved in the following way: “But when the young Venetian made his report, a different communication was established between him and the emperor. Newly arrived and totally ignorant of the Levantine languages, Marco Polo could express himself only with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder and of horror, animal barkings or hootings, or with objects that he took from his knapsacks - ostrich plumes, pea-shooters, quartzes - which he arranged in front of him like chessmen.

Returning from the missions on which Kublai sent him on, the ingenious foreigner improvised pantomimes that the sovereign had to interpret: one city was depicted by the leap of a fish escaping the cormorant's beak to fall into a net; another city by a naked man running through fire unscorched; a third by a skull, its teeth green with mould, clenching a round, white pearl. The great Khan deciphered the signs, but the connection between them and the places visited remained uncertain; he never knew whether Marco wished to enact an adventure that had befallen him on his journey, an exploit of the city's founder, the prophecy of an astrologer, a rebus or a charade to indicate a name. But, obscure or obvious as it might be, everything Marco displayed had the power of emblems, which once seen, cannot be forgotten or confused. In the Khan's mind the empire was reflected in a desert of labile and interchangeable data, like grains of sand, from which there appeared, for each city and province, the figures evoked by the Venetian's logographs.”⁹

This “reconstruction of the field on new bases” poses unavoidable questions as far as traditional communication models are concerned.

2. The change in the communication model: from Jakobson to Lotman

Faced with a type of dialogical exchange like that between Kubla Khan and Marco Polo, described by Calvino, or the relationship of immeasurability between the paradigms of different scientific communities, of which Kuhn speaks, Jakobson's traditional communication model, schematised in the following diagram, shows the limits and gaps that actually make it unable to be applied:

CONTEXT / MESSAGE / TRANSMITTER / CONTACT / RECEIVER / CODE

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 363-364.

⁹ I. Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, translated from the Italian by William Weaver, Vintage, London, 1997, pp. 21-22.

Errore. Il segnalibro non è definito.

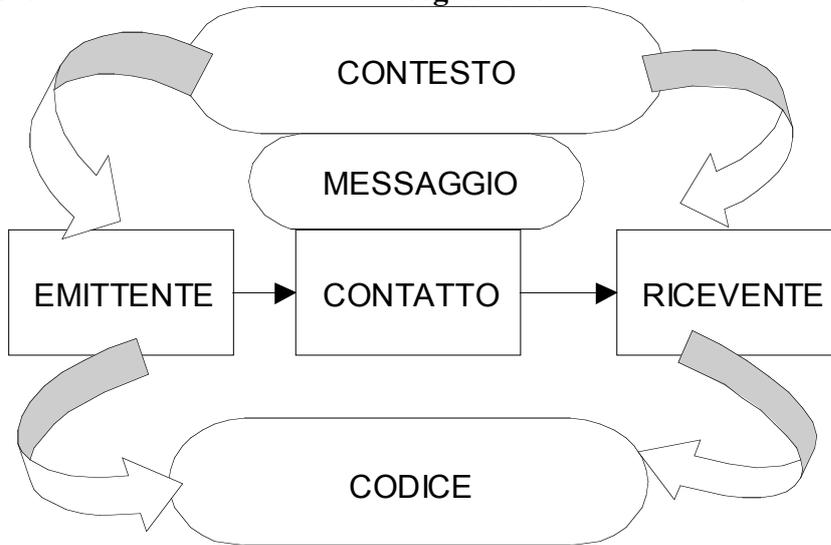


Fig. 1 Jakobson's communication model

In this model, in effect, it is taken for granted that the sender and addressee (or transmitter and receiver), due to the fact that they are in the same context and use the same code, which obviously takes into account the distinctiveness of the channel being used, can exchange messages in an unproblematic manner.

Even in the case of a shared code on the part of the subjects involved in the communicative process, reality is, however, much more complex. As Lotman in fact observes, "The addresser encodes the message with the help of a set of codes, of which only a part are present in the decoding consciousness of the addressee. It is for this reason that all understanding, no matter how many developed semiotic systems are used is partial and approximative. But it is important to emphasize that a degree of non-understanding cannot be interpreted as only 'noise' – a harmful consequence of an imperfection of the system, which is not present in the idealized schema. The growth of non-understanding and/or inadequate understanding may bear witness to the technical defects in the system of communications, but it may also be an indicator of the increased complexity of this system, its capacity to fulfill ever more complex and important cultural functions. If one draws up a scale, according to the degree of complexity, of systems of social communication from the language of traffic signals to the language of poetry, then it becomes obvious that the growth of ambiguity in the decoding cannot be ascribed only to the technical faults in any particular type of communication. It follows that the act of communication (in any sufficiently complex, and consequently culturally valuable, instance) should be seen not as a simple transmission of a message which remains adequate to itself from the consciousness of the addresser to the consciousness of the addressee, but as a *translation* of a text from the language of my 'I' to the language of your 'you'. The very possibility of such a translation is determined by the fact that the codes of both participants in the communication, although not identical, form intersecting sets. But

since, in the given act of translation, a certain part of the message is always cut off, and 'I' am submitted to a transformation in the course of translation into language 'you', what is lost is just the individuality of the addressee, that is, what, from the point of view of the whole, is the most valuable thing in the message. The situation would be hopeless if the received part of the message did not contain indications as to how the addressee should transform his personality in order to understand the lost part of the message. In this way the non-identity of the partners in the communication turns just this fact from a passive transmission into a game of conflict in the course of which each side aims to reconstruct the semiotic world of his opponent according to his own model, and at the same time is interested in the preservation of his partner's individuality".¹⁰

What is touched upon here is an extremely important point as far as communication is concerned, the presuppositions it requires and its relationship with language. What Lotman highlights is that non-fictitious communication, which can and must be realised between two subjects who start off with a different "package of beliefs", depends on the possibility that each of the two speakers is able to recognise the beliefs of the other in relation to the same context, simulate them and incorporate them in his own "semiotic world", constructing a reliable model of them so as to achieve progressive "tuning" of their respective orientations.

Communication is possible only if this shareability of notions and beliefs is presupposed or if, when it is lacking, instead of ignoring its absence, an effort is made to start off and gradually develop the task of working out a common, shared group of ideas and points of view on the "world". Language cannot therefore be considered the prerequisite of believing, but the two aspects are to be considered in parallel, in the sense that language becomes all the more efficacious and communication all the more successful, the more the beliefs of the speakers are "registered" and brought into tune between them.

The crisis of the traditional communication model is further accentuated when one is faced with a situation like the one created between Marco Polo and Kubla Khan, which, moreover, the globalisation scenario and now unarrestable migratory flows that enormously increase the opportunities for contact between languages, semiotic worlds and different cultures, make more and more topical and, in a certain sense, "paradigmatic".

In this case efficacy of communication refers to the fact that the value of the latter lies not in what the sender and addressee share at the outset, but in the possibility of comparing the respective differences, memories and languages that are not shared and having them carry on a dialogue. As Lotman underlined on several occasions, the *paradox of communication* lies in what makes it difficult, at worst impossible, precisely because it is in this situation that the need to *translate the untranslatable* is imposed, thus generating new meanings and, if it comes to it, a new *hybrid culture*.

In the sphere of the communicative process that arises between the two subjects in question, however, what according to La Cecla¹¹ we might call the space of "misunderstanding", i.e. the place where the "border takes shape"¹² and becomes "intermediate space", precisely because it is through the initial misinterpretation, and the misunderstanding that is a result of it, that differences are defined, the various ways of seeing the world, the variety of styles of thought. In the space of the encounter/clash the misunderstanding becomes a stimulus and occasion for translation of languages, a sort of compromise aimed at achieving understanding. The misunderstanding carries out a social function: it is society itself; it fills in the space between individuals with cotton wool, feathers, absorbing lies.

This initial border from demarcation line ends up progressively becoming "a neutral zone, where identity, reciprocal identities, can face each other, remaining divided indeed by a misunderstanding".¹³ The misunderstanding is thus strongly correlated with the idea of encounter,

¹⁰ Yu. M. Lotman Yu M, *Culture as Collective Intellect and the Problems of Artificial Intelligence*. Russian Poetics in translation, 6, University of Essex, 1979., pp. 84-86.

¹¹ F. La Cecla, *Il malinteso. Antropologia dell'incontro*, Laterza, Bari, 1997.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 9.

¹³ *Ivi*.

namely with the possibility that two different people, through messages not fully understood initially, neither by one nor the other, gradually manage to know and understand each other and establish a reciprocal balance that gives place to a third entity, intersubjective and of a systemic type, within which the best characteristics of the two original subjects may emerge and progressively assert themselves.

From this picture, then, two types of communication arise that are quite different as far as their value and meaning is concerned and the contribution they can provide in terms of creativity:

- the one we can define, in slightly extreme terms, with the purpose of highlighting as much as possible its distinctive trait, *banal communication*, which develops entirely within the background shared by the sender and the addressee, in the space we can call *intersection* between their codes and memories, and for this does not in any way extend its range and is not a harbinger of truly innovative knowledge and information;
- and *efficacious communication*, which happens outside the above-mentioned shared background, in a reciprocally extraneous space and thus entails an inevitable *twist of meaning*, its translation, from which that “space of misunderstanding” La Cecla speaks of cannot but emerge, at least initially. In this case the boundary between sender and addressee, which takes on such importance as to rise to being a key concept, takes shapes first of all as a *line of demarcation* that seems almost insurmountable. It is only with the practice of interchange and reciprocal dialogue that this boundary takes on bit by bit the appearance of a porous limit that, like the sheath of a cell, is permeable, and from the cultural point of view to be considered a place of continuous processes of translation, a sort of set of *semiotic filters*. In this way it progressively turns into an interface that not only permits a translation at last reliable, but makes sure that the space of misunderstanding and initial reciprocal extraneity be replaced little by little by a background that is at least partially shared.

Reference to this distinction and the clear option in favour of the second modality of communication enables Lotman to characterise his approach in terms of a substantial upsetting of perspective with respect to both of the two main western semiotic traditions, that of the Peirce-Morris current and that of the line going back to Saussure. In spite of their undeniable theoretical differences, according to Lotman, they are actually united by a very similar analysis perspective, which favours the search for the *atomic, simple* element, to reconstruct, from it, the complex fact, as results, for example, from the centrality attributed by both to the concept of sign. An approach that then led to the whole being considered in a tendentially *ontological* way as the sum of its parts.

Whereas Lotman’s orientation departs from the assumption that systems made up of elements that are clearly separate one from the other and functionally univocal do not exist in reality, in a condition of isolation. Their division into parts is only a heuristic necessity. None of them, taken separately, is able to really function. It only does if immersed in a semiotic continuum full of formations of different kinds placed at various levels of organisation.¹⁴ This continuum that makes social life, relations and communication possible, Lotman calls the *semiosphere*, by analogy with the concept of *biosphere* – the ambit necessary for biological survival of the living being – introduced by a scientist who greatly influenced his thought, V. I. Vernadskij (1863-1945), the founder of a new evolutionist current in mineralogy and biogeochemistry.

This organicist metaphor in fact enables the semiosphere to be conceived as a single large *ambience*: the primary role will not belong therefore to this or that brick, but to the *great system* called semiosphere. The semiosphere is that semiotic *space* outside which the existence of semiosis is not possible, and therefore of communication itself.

With the passage from the classical communication model, that of Jakobson, to the alternative one proposed by Lotman the barycentre of the communicative process shifts from the centrality of the

¹⁴ Yu. M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. (Translated by Ann Shukman, introduction by Umberto Eco.) I.B.Tauris Publishers, London & New York, 2001 (Part two- “The Semiosphere”- Semiotic space, pp. 123-131).

message and subjects involved in this process (sender and addressee) towards the intermediate space between them, which can be more or less full, in the case of the presence of a shared background, acting as ground for intersection between the respective codes, or entirely empty, in the case of reciprocal extraneity of the two.

3. The “intermediate space” as place of communication

This empty space is not, however, a simple nothing, a simple absence or lack, the non-being that cancels out the being, but the place belonging to communication, i.e. a *nothing that excites and stimulates the latter* and from which its actual possibility springs. To properly understand the sense of this apparently obscure statement, it is sufficient to go to the origin of the term “symbolon”. This is, as is known, an ancient Greek term indicating a precise object, which might correspond to a modern identity card. It derives from a specific object split into two parts: each half is a “symbolon”, the whole joined together is totality, completeness; and it may be a pot, a vase, a seal or any other thing. “Symbolon” derives from “synballo”, which means “to put together”; therefore the symbol is one of the two parts, half of the whole, which needs the other half and must be put together with it to recreate unity and trigger recognition, and therefore communication. The opposite of “symbolon”, still in the ancient Greek language, is “diabolon” from “diaballo”, which means “to separate, divide”, and indicates a falsified card, i.e. the half that does not fit and has therefore been forged, the false part that does not create unity.

The “symbol”, therefore, stands for what is not valid just for its content, but for the *possibility of being exhibited*. It enables the other to be *recognised*, even though not personally known: and this power of recognition it has, and therefore its meaning, is not in either of the two material halves into which it was originally split, nor in the persons owning it, but in the *dividing line* that is the result of their separation and in which lies the possibility of confirming or not the perfect fit of these two halves. The dividing line, from the material point of view, is a nothing, but a nothing that is not a simple absence, but something where indeed the *symbolic function* lies, which coincides with its own being and happening. This line originally refers back to itself, and grants meaning both to the presence of the reality of the designated (the material *object*, each of the two halves of the seal split into two), and of the presence of the designatory intentions of he who is the bearer (the *subject* who keeps it as a guarantee of hospitality given or received and who can therefore perennially remember those who gave him hospitality, or vice-versa, those he gave hospitality to, by looking at his fragment and thinking of the missing part of it).

In the same way, even if the two protagonists of the communicative process who do not yet have a shared background acting as a space of intersection of their codes and memories, find themselves, due to the fact of being in a communicative stance, in a situation of *distanced co-belonging* to the same process, this makes the space separating them (the intermediate space) begin, at the same time, to place them in a reciprocal relationship and therefore unite them. So this space which separates and unites at the same time, or rather constitutes the division which *therefore* unifies, is the matrix, the original place and privileged space of communication, which finds, consequently, its most appropriate collocation precisely in the intermediate space, on the border that initially separates and is the line of demarcation, then gradually takes shape and becomes a “buffer space” with two faces, one pointing towards the sender and the other towards the addressee, the seat of those continuous processes of translation, a sort of set of *semiotic filters* of which, as we have said, Lotman speaks.

It is worth working further on this notion of “intermediate space” and exploring its nature of border space, which introduces the interface into the often chaotic process of coexistence and interchange between different codes, memories and traditions, i.e. the gradual threshold of the passage and translation, of change to some extent controlled, which is configured therefore as a surface of accumulation of experience and knowledge, thanks to which the border itself may “take shape” and little by little become structured, taking on the function of “line of attrition and resistance”, which,

however, does not exclude all things but selects and bit by bit assimilates what may prove useful to reciprocal comprehension and dialogue between the parties involved. It is worth it, as this exploration enables us to understand how, by taking shape, the border gradually takes on its structure, is consolidated, becomes configured as what Arendt calls the “infra space”, emphasising that public is the common world, *the infra*, things and men. In Arendt’s opinion the crisis of politics has to do precisely with the destruction of this space between men, this infra where laws and constitutions have their origin. The single person, in his isolation, is never free and freedom, therefore, always draws its origins from the *infra* which is only created where many people meet and can only subsist as long as they stay together; thus, in the Greek world, it was spatially limited by the walls of the city, it coincided with the *polis*, outside which it was not possible to be political men. For this reason the *infra* is that which is authentically historico-political; it is not man who is a *zoon politikon*, or is historic, but men, to the extent that they move within the ambit that *lies between* them. The concept of plurality as the possibility of existence of the infra is therefore important for Hannah Arendt to define political freedom and, negatively, also to define totalitarianism (as an absence of plurality, i.e. as the absence of space between one individual and another). In “Ideology and terror” – the last chapter of *The origins of totalitarianism*¹⁵ – Arendt theorises precisely the destruction of this infra as a distinctive feature of totalitarianism, which substitutes the limits and channels of communication between individuals with an iron bond that keeps them so tightly united as to make their plurality disappear into a single man of gigantic dimensions. Its distinctive trait, therefore, lies precisely in the fact of abolishing boundaries between individuals, pressing men one against the other. Due to this the intermediate space, this space *between* men, may be legitimately considered an indispensable presupposition and precondition of freedom and becomes, consequently, a more and more important and fascinating theme for the idea and vision of the city, since it is precisely this gap that ensures plurality, the existence of individuals not squashed one against the other. The *infra* is a space that keeps individuals related: they are together, but are also separate from each other.

This process of progressive construction of the “infra”, therefore the “intermediate space”, which we are concentrating on, the process in which at least two different cultural worlds are involved (two codes, two memories, two traditions, two cultures and so on), departs from a situation of reciprocal extraneity, in which the intermediate is a sort of hollow gap, an empty space that separates and prevents contact between the two parties involved. As we have seen, this situation also occurs in the relationship between two different scientific theories, between which it is not at all unusual that, at least initially, a preliminary reciprocal contact must be patiently constructed through compromises between incompatible objectives, compromises that inevitably alter the communication but have the value of at least starting it off. Here that aspect of the process of communication emerges very clearly, which, as has been seen, Lotman has particularly highlighted, thanks to which each of those involved in the reciprocal exchange of messages - for the exchange to reach its aim and prove effective, without giving rise to excessive misinterpretations - has to begin creating himself a *model of the semiotic world* of his counterpart, on the basis of which to work out the information to be sent, so that it results as comprehensible as possible. The construction of this model is clearly the fruit of a process of attempts, exposed to errors which are by degrees refined and to “forced efforts” gradually smoothed down, with neither one nor the other party able to be completely eliminated. By this route, however, the initial hollow gap becomes little by little “contact” and then “intersection” and shared background. Using the case of two scientific theories that find themselves initially in a situation of immeasurability and reciprocal extraneity, due to the fact that they have a “different slant” on the world, Kuhn thus begins to properly exemplify the process by which the border progressively takes shape. The situation at the outset from which this process starts and develops is always *antinomic tension* between two ambits, each unyielding to the other and immeasurable, being devoid of the possibility of resorting to neutral sub-linguistic means and, therefore, of the availability of a

¹⁵ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt, New York, 1951.

common background. This tension triggers the effort to overcome, in some way, the opposition between the domains involved and to build some kind of bridge between them, though aware that their “difference” and reciprocal “attrition” will never be able to be eliminated altogether. From this attempt, however, an “intermediate world” emerges and gradually takes shape constituting little by little an authentic reality in itself.

It is important to note that the dialogical process between different semiotic worlds and cultures which we are talking about, cannot be limited to the rational, reasoning dimension alone, but must also manage to draw resources from what Goleman¹⁶ defines as “emotional intelligence”, to which the most recent research in the field of neuroscience agrees should be attributed a fundamental communicative function. Only in this way can subjects even with a strong deficit as far as the logics of rational, discursive reasoning are concerned, be put into the position of being able to talk about their ethical choices or the consequences that autonomous or heteronomous adoption of certain norms and lifestyles entails for their existence.

For there may be people who, though they do not have the possibility to produce a reasoned justification for their own values, their own culture, their own vision of the world, are nevertheless able to relate the experience they have of these same values on a daily basis: an experience, with all manner of evidence, not just rational but also emotional. An Islamic girl of the Paris *banlieu* – to give the most obvious example, but also the most dramatically close – will not perhaps be able to give arguments for her own (more or less free) choice to wear the veil, but not for that will she be unable to talk about the *rational-emotional experience of the value* that this decision entails and its existential implications. The space of the “infra” must therefore – transgressing Plato’s interdict – extend the rights of citizenship also to rhetoric, to talking about oneself, to the experiences of narrating voices. Which does not, however, in any way authorise – it should be strongly emphasised – narrations to be assumed with no benefit of inventory. In effect, nothing guarantees that a narrative strategy might not have self-justifying and self-apologetic effects on the same level as an argumentative strategy of an ideological kind. In the unavoidable blend of reason and experience, argumentation and narration, that affects the relations between the different human groups in the “glocalised” world, a democratic public sphere may admit, yes, then, rhetoric: but, as Carlo Ginzburg has appropriately emphasised – on condition that it is a case of *rhetorics with proof*, not rhetorics without proof. It is this, as Giacomo Marramao has rightly underlined¹⁷, the step to be taken if we want to leave behind us both the ethnocentric translations of universalism and the annihilative trends of that historic relativism that takes as an *a priori* the forms of self-comprehension of each culture, actually making immeasurability a synonym of incomparability and uncomposability.

4. The logic of translation as subversion of the logic of the Utopia

It is, also in this case, a matter of becoming “good listeners and translators”, of knowing how to handle competently not just the codes and languages of signs, but also the symbolic and emotional dimensions that show they contain meanings, though are not able to express them properly by argumentation. For cultures live and are animated by what Gardner calls “multiple intelligences”¹⁸, made up of a mixture, with percentages varying from one to another of cognitive and emotional aspects, and which precisely for this reason always contemplate, some more some less, the active presence of symbolic elements to take and present as “ciphers”, “that is, something that, enclosing within itself a meaning, does reveal the presence of this but, at the same time and perennially, hides its nature. In such a sense the symbol does refer back to something, not in the way a signifier refers to the signified, but in the way a signifier warns the interpreter of the presence of a hidden meaning.

¹⁶ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, Bloomsbury, London, 1996.

¹⁷ G. Marramao, *Westward Passage*, Verso, London-New York, 2008.

¹⁸ H. Gardner, *Frames of Mind*. The theory of multiple intelligences, Basic Books, New York, 1983.

Aliquid obscure aliquid in se ipsum abdit”¹⁹. The symbol understood in this sense, as something characterised by semantic intransitiveness, in the sense that the meaning is kept within it, cannot be made explicit, is not separable from the expression of the symbol itself, has, as Trevi emphasises, on the wake of Jung, “the character of syntheticity or, better, of the ‘composition’, where to this term is given the meaning of ‘put together’, ‘keep united’ (*componere*). What is kept together in the symbol are the opposites that rational, diriment thought keeps legitimately separate and, in this mutual exclusion, detaches and keeps distant. This feature of such a type of symbol, highlighted in particular by the Romantics, makes the symbol itself inaccessible to reason and configures it as the product of intuition that *crosses and lacerates the logical tissue of the normal, rational order of thought*. In this sense the symbol expresses *tension and creative antinomicity* but also union and connection”²⁰.

For this reason, too, the practice of reciprocal comprehension and translation from one semiotic world to another is anything but effortless: to be started off initially a game of mirrors should be concentrated on, in which one tends to take on the prerogatives of the other, until they manage to work out little by little, by trial and error, a model of the semiotic world of their counterpart. Here is what is authentically at stake in the passage from Jakobson’s model of communication to that of Lotman. The first, in founding his theory on communicative acting between different subjects (individual or collective), makes what they have in common his base, and aims, in actual fact, to exorcise and neutralise the differences. Whereas Lotman, rather than identify the place of agreement, tends to exalt the function of conflict, in that it is precisely in the conflict of identities, not hidden nor toned down in its significance, that recognition of the differences occurs, and it is the appreciation of the latter that makes significant elements of novelty and creativity emerge in the communicative process. On one condition, however: that this conflict, as Marramao highlights in the work quoted, always takes place on the threshold of the passage to the West, which imposes on each identity to not feel final and irrevocable, but transient, contingent. The opening to “seeing and thinking” differently even our own identity and values is fundamental, in that it enables us to anchor our styles of perceiving and thinking and forms of life not in the way, perhaps univocally determined, in which they are lived and practised in the reality of a specific historic phase, but to project them into the sphere of possible meanings that could be granted them without however betraying their nature and inspiration.

The passage to the West should not therefore be over-stepped in the direction of that far-off island of the world that is Utopia, the prototype of all “realisation of the virtual” and precisely for this non-place, or happy place, *Outopos* or *Eutopos* rather than *Utopia*, the emblem of liberation from the past and from place, from the concept of history itself, that Utopia does not intend to criticise or question, but *to deny*, in that, as Massimo Cacciari writes, it “wants to be an *absolutum*: its idea is that of a radical, irreversible *breaking away* from all matters, conflicts, traditions of the land, namely a ‘liberation from history’, for it is from its history that laws come, always troubled, always contradictory”²¹. The form of Utopia thus implies *total uprooting*. The Utopia cannot have any position over history other than *denying its sense*.

It certainly is not by chance that in the various forms and expressions in which Utopia is manifest the gift of languages is present, but never the role of the *translator*. This is symptomatic, in that only by departing from the problems of translation can “humanism” within a situation of plurality be considered that does not entail the annulment of all differences, the prevalence of the formless, the cancellation of borders and their function as a threshold of change and passage from one code to another, from one memory to another, from one tradition and one culture to others. In this sense *a logic of translation may therefore be proposed as subversion of the logic of the Utopia*. This is the deepest meaning that we can attribute to the way Benjamin understands the task and “mission” of the translator: the latter should be capable of *moving and living on the border between different*

¹⁹ M. Trevi, “*Instrumentum symboli*”, ‘Metaxù’, 1, 1986, p.55.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 50-51 (my italics).

²¹ M. Cacciari, *Disincantata Utopia*, in F. Bacone, *Nuova Atlantide*, It. ed. Silvio Berlusconi Editore, Milan, 1996, p. XVII,

semiotic worlds and to evaluate, precisely because he is placed in this transitory position, the conflicts between the parties found on each side of this line of demarcation, without trying to “sweeten them” or even hide their nature and depth, but trying to work towards the transformation of this line of demarcation into an interface and have the border itself take shape and structure. In this sense the *no-place of translation*, the intermediate space between cultures that it manages to have emerge and take on a structure, giving it shape, is the only Utopia to be realised, *here and now*, in the present and not elsewhere and in another period, in that it constitutes the only resource we can realistically dispose of to come out of the double grip of forced homologation to a single culture, on the one hand, and perennial conflict with no outlets between civilisations, on the other.