A Tactical Guide to Cultural Translation

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Preface

What This Book Is, and What It Isn't

This book is part of an answer to a question I asked when I was redesigning a course I often teach: how might a class, taken as a unit (of which a book is merely part), serve as a vehicle for ideas? I was thinking about how different types of writing express ideas differently. A song, a novel, and a comic book can all recount the same events, but they won't tell the same story. Likewise, a monograph, an article, and a conference paper can all report the same results, but they won't convey the same ideas. So how might a class—with its books, its syllabus, its assignments, its regularly scheduled meetings, its questions and answers—become a collective, collaborative text? Who could read it? What would they learn?

I wrote this book with these questions in mind. As a result, the chapters that follow might sound like lectures or, if I'm doing things right, half of a conversation I carry on with my students. That's by design, in that I use this book to demonstrate the ideas I describe. In the introduction, for instance, I give an example of two people trying to come to a shared understanding of an object through a series of back-and-forth questions. Through this book I engage in a similar exchange. The things I want to understand better are cultural translation and communication theory, and those are the things we talk about in class.

Consequently, my primary audience has been the students in the course I was redesigning, a third-year undergraduate course on communication theory at the University of Ottawa. They have been worthy partners in conversation. They are smart people, capable of careful and rigorous thought, if they're so inclined. They're willing to work, although like anyone else, they object to work that serves no clear purpose. The most meaningful difference between them and me is that I've had twenty more years to spend reading: when I make references they do not catch, it is not because I'm smarter but because I'm older. These things—my students' intelligence and work ethic on the one hand, the disparity in our respective experience on the other—explain two choices I've made in the pages that follow. First, I've explained every reference I think even ten students (out of a class of a hundred) might not catch. Second, I've used pictures wherever they are useful for cutting through the abstractions to which I'm prone, and to which the subject matter lends itself, especially in cases of metacognition and metatheory (thinking about thinking and theory about theory). I want this book to demonstrate that clarity and rigor go hand in hand, a lesson for which I have my students to thank.

My secondary audience has been other scholars. I address two groups explicitly: those in translation studies and those in communication. But I am responding to a third group, too, namely philosophers of education (and research) whose books have influenced the way I think about teaching. I do not address them explicitly, but, instead, this book (and the class of which it is part) is itself my response to their work. In particular, I am guided by the idea that

> [i]t is time to put what is good in the world—that which is under threat and which we wish to preserve—at the centre of our attention and to make a conceptual

> space in which we can take up our responsibility ... in the face of, and in spite of, oppression and silent melancholy.[1]

I like these philosophers because they issue a call to action. ("The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways," wrote Marx in 1845, "the point is to change it."[2]) I'm responding by heeding their call and trying to put their ideas (and mine) into practice. They insist—and I agree—that teaching matters. It matters because thinking matters, and thinking matters because the world is a mysterious place worth exploring and fighting for.

So what is this book? It is a book for teaching, but it is not a textbook. It is for thinking, but it is not for memorizing. To complement it (and complete the class-as-text of which it's part), I've made the lecture slides available online, and I've included a syllabus in the appendix and questions at the end of each chapter.[3] The questions are meant to encourage my students to respond. This book is meaningful only if people take their turn in the conversation.

With that, let's begin.

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[1] Hodgson, Vlieghe, and Zamojski, *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy*, p. 19. Other books to which I am responding are Samuel Rocha's *Folk Phenomenology* and *A Primer for Philosophy and Education* and, in a very different vein, William Caraher, Kostis Kourelis, and Andrew Reinhard's *Punk Archaeology*.

[2] Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," thesis XI.

[3] *Note: I will make the slides available and add the syllabus and questions in Summer 2018.*

Introduction

People's Minds Are Hard to Change

People's minds are hard to change. When we encounter a new idea, we compare it to things in the world we already know, and that world—the one we navigate through every day—already makes sense. It is fully formed, and even if an outside viewer might say it's faulty, it seems complete to us. There are no loose ends, and new ideas clash with its completeness. To make sense of them, we ask whether they fit in the world we know, but because they're new, they might not. The problem isn't the new idea—it's the persuasiveness of the world we have come to know and take for granted.[1]

This book is about how to change people's minds. It takes as its starting point two related observations. First, in our modern world, we are faced with tremendous challenges—intense social and political polarization, the looming threat of terror, and the reality of systemic discrimination, to name only a few. Second, these challenges have at least one thing in common: however wide the range of factors that have brought them about, they are all supported by some people's interpretations of the world, interpretations that cause them to act in ways that perpetuate the challenges we face. At the same time, not everyone sees the world the same way. People's minds can be changed. We must ask how the factors that shape these challenges come to

[1] See Dole and Sinatra, "Reconceptualizing Change in Cognitive Construction of Knowledge" and Posner, Strike, and Gertzog, "Accommodation of a Scientific Conception."

have meaning and recognize that meaning, in the end, is not static or inherent. It can be contested. That contest is our goal, and this book is one way to achieve it. It is about shifting people's perspectives—our perspectives—so that the world we already know appears a bit *off*. That is, it is about shaking up the world we know so we can see what an outside viewer can see but we cannot. The tool to make this possible is cultural translation.

What is cultural translation? It is a term that means a lot of things to a lot of people. It's the approach anthropologists take to explaining a foreign culture to their readers, or it's a way for people in post-colonial societies to draw the hegemonic logic of colonialism into question.[2] But it means something specific to me. As I describe it in this book, it is (1) a way to come to understand an object or text (2) whose meaning derives from a shared interpretation of the world. It takes place (3) through conversation and exchange.

Consider a simple illustration. Two people meet, and the first is interested in an object the second carries. "What is it?" asks the first. "It's an X," says the second. "We use it when we do Y." "Oh," says the first, "that's like when we do Z." "Not exactly," answers the second, "it's more like this..." Through such an exchange, the first person, substituting familiar references for the object in question, comes to understand (at least in an approximate way) how the second makes sense of it.

[2] See Conway, "A Conceptual and Empirical Approach to Cultural Translation" and Maitland, *What Is Cultural Translation?*

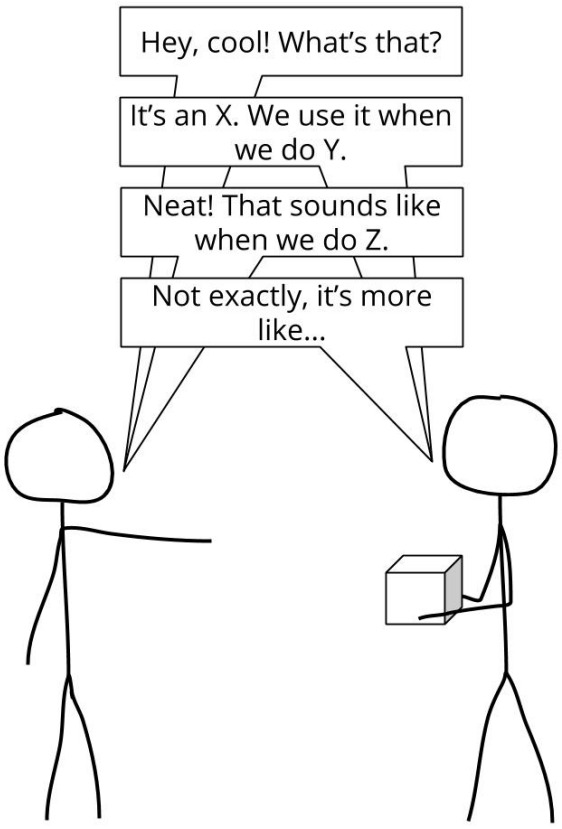

Figure 0.1. Cultural translation

In other words, cultural translation is a form of a give-and-take over meaning, or as I describe it elsewhere, in ways more in line with my scholarly argot, a semiotic economy where signs are exchanged for other signs on a basis not of equivalence but of negotiation.[3] What makes it *translation* is the way we substitute one sign for another. What makes it *cultural* is the way the objects whose meaning we are trying to discover are shared among members of different communities (although boundaries between communities might not be clearly marked). The type of cultural translation I am most interested in has clear ethical implications. It must, as Sarah Maitland insists, "have as its primary objective nothing short of the transformation of human

[3] Conway, "Cultural Translation, Global Television Studies, and the Circulation of Telenovelas in the United States."

hearts and minds."[4]

How do we reach this high bar? I propose that we engage in acts of willful and strategic misreading. As I describe in the following sections, I'm writing to teachers and students. Our task is to return to the work of thinking, to reclaim our engagement with ideas. This task is complicated (and enriched) by the double status of cultural translation: it is our primary object of study, but it also provides a mode of inquiry. That is, we can ask about the tools people use to arrive at a shared understanding of an object, and we can use those tools to understand the object of cultural translation itself. This reflexivity in turn opens up the question of what it means to communicate. There is no more fundamental theoretical question than this, and in this respect, this book has a second area of focus, namely communication theory.

In the next sections, I talk about my audiences, and I untangle the relationship between the fields of translation studies and communication. Then I describe how teaching and research are two sides of the same coin and how they impose their own strategies to cultivate and refine the skills of purposeful reading. These strategies lead me finally to the idea of the parallax view, or the shift in perspective that makes willful misreading possible. It is the parallax view that, ultimately, makes this book a tactical guide to cultural translation.

Who are we? What is our role?

I want to be clear about something. When I say "we," it's not an abstraction. I mean real people leading real lives. What we're doing is theory, and we're doing it with the practical goal of changing people's minds by helping them shift perspective so the world they know appears a bit

[4] Maitland, *What Is Cultural Translation?*, p. 53.

off. In that respect, this is not a conventional book. It's an experiment. We will play—*I* will play—with tone and registers, and there will be lots of pictures. I argue (in chapter 1) that communication is always translation because we are always substituting one sign for another, and I want to substitute (among other things) pictures for words. I also argue that communication is rooted in the contingent moment. I am not an objective reporter. You (yes, *you*) are not a neutral observer. My first draft of this book (as I am writing it *right now*) is not a book at all. It's a series of lectures, complete with slides, that I will deliver as part of a class, probably next semester. This is why, in this book, we are inextricably imbricated in indexicals, words that point to people or places or moments in time—"you," "I," "there," "here," "then," "now." Our relationship is real, if temporally complicated. (My *right now* is not your *right now*. I am imagining you, future reader, imagining me, where my present is your past.) This guide is tactical only as long as we remember that relationship.

In other words, this book has a second purpose, in addition to exploring cultural translation. It is a teaching tool, and it is addressed to a very specific audience: professors and students (specifically in cultural studies and translation studies, as I write below). I am a professor. I have been teaching for a decade and a half. Right now I teach at the University of Ottawa. I was also once a student. I earned a bachelor's degree at the University of North Dakota, a master's at York University in Toronto, and a PhD at the University of Wisconsin. Why do I include these personal details? Because I am not talking to students or professors in an abstract sense. I am talking to my colleagues and friends, and I am talking to my students. I am concerned that, under pressure from politicians and businesses to turn university education into workforce training, we run the very real risk of abdicating our responsibility to train people to

think or to do the work of thinking ourselves. Thus when I talk of students and professors, I don't want to make airy pronouncements about the university and society. I want to call for a return to the hard work of thinking. (If you're my student, remember—I am talking to *you*.) That's who we are. That's our role.

What is this work? Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno give us some sense of it in "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" when they talk about competing notions of artistic style. In a broad sense, they argue that the culture industry tells us what to think and how to feel. (By *culture industry* they mean the capitalists who sell us entertainment and shape how we understand the world.) Of course, we don't like to be told these things, and we flatter ourselves to believe that even if others can be duped, we cannot. But the culture industry is pernicious: it tricks us into thinking it's *our* idea to feel the way it wants us to feel. We trade real thinking for ersatz thinking. In the case of style, we trade an older concept for a newer, flatter one. In the past, *style* described the form an artist's statement took in the face of the world as its forces overwhelmed and negated her or him. It was individual and irreproducible. In contrast, *style* in contemporary culture describes the routinized elements that act like an artist's "brand." It is rule-bound and predictable. The culture industry banks on the fact that we consumers value consistency: we want to know what we're getting before we pay for it. In contrast, the work we teachers and students must do—the work I hope to encourage with this book—is to return to the type of engagement that produced the older form of artistic style.

You could raise objections, of course. If you're feeling ungenerous, you might say that professional academics like me are members of the worrying class. Our job is to generate alarm and then offer the very classes people should take to overcome their myopia. It's a cynical racket.

We diagnose a problem people didn't even know they had and then sell them the tools to solve it.

But we needn't look to cynical scholars for this type of critique. A.O. Scott, film critic for the *New York Times*, wrote in a review of the Adam Sandler movie *Funny People*, in which Sandler's face is superimposed on a baby's body, that "there may be no more incisive rendering of Hollywood's self-image, and perhaps no truer, more damning mirror held up to the audience" than "that alarming man-baby, with the braying voice and the 5 o'clock shadow affixed to a pale, flabby, diaper-wrapped trunk." He goes on to say,

> Children are ceaselessly demanding, it's true; but they are also easily satisfied, and this combination of appetite and docility makes the child an ideal moviegoer. But since there are a finite number of literal children out there, with limited disposable income and short attention spans, Hollywood has to make or find new ones. And so the studios have, with increasing vigor and intensity, carried out a program of mass infantilization.[5]

It's a powerful indictment.

There's a second objection to raise, one that comes from scholars themselves. If the field of cultural studies has taught us anything in the last two decades, it's that we should beware of these tales of gloom and doom. Audiences are active. We're not dupes. The media don't crack open our heads and dump in their content. Instead, we're active readers of different texts. We bring our experience to what we see and hear, and we interpret it through a lens that is partially of our own making, partially a function of our class, gender, race, and so on. We exercise our agency in constant tension with the world around us: even as our choices are constrained by the

[5] Scott, "Open Wide: Spoon-Fed Cinema."

relations of power that link us to other people and groups, we still have choices to make. (Notably, this is the argument Stuart Hall makes in "Encoding/Decoding," the subject of chapter 1.)

Still, people are susceptible to the persuasions of advertising, which tells us we'll be happy if only we buy the right deodorant or eat the right breakfast cereal. We are susceptible to fake news, or at the very least, to politicians who flatter us and tell us just how right we are. And, frankly, we don't like hearing from people who disagree with us.[6] In other words, our being duped isn't a given, but neither is our resistance. What matters is the way we exercise our agency, even when it is constrained. We have the capacity to develop strategies for active resistance, but it must be cultivated. Hence our role as professors and students. As Pierre Bourdieu writes, "intellectual discourse remains one of the most authentic forms of resistance to manipulation and a vital affirmation of the freedom of thought."[7] Hence this book.

Disciplining the fields

I wrote above that I am addressing professors and students in cultural studies and translation studies. I hope others read this book, too, but if you know my audience, you'll have a better sense of the context for my argument.

So what constitutes these fields?

My formal training is in cultural studies (as a subfield of communication), but my principal object of study has long been translation, and I publish often in translation studies journals. I have observed, as have others, that there is little exchange between these fields:

[6] See Frimer, Skitka, and Motyl, "Liberals and Conservatives are Similarly Motivated to Avoid Exposure to One Another's Opinions."
[7] Bourdieu, *On Television*, p. 11.

"language and translation have been systematically neglected in the current literature on globalization."[8] Or "to a large extent, media, cultural and globalization studies have essentially ignored questions of language and translation."[9] Or again, "despite some early opportunities, translation and communication have had little to 'say' directly to one another."[10]

Even when cultural studies and translation scholars *do* examine the same things, they often talk past each other. Translation scholars, for instance, have catalogued the many ways translators are influenced by the ideologically charged sociocultural contexts within which they work, nuances that many cultural studies scholars fail to see. Translation scholars, on the other hand, often overlook the complex and contradictory forms of influence that texts have over audiences, forms that cultural studies scholars have deftly explored.

For that reason, I hope this book will be an opening point for a new line of inquiry, one that puts cultural studies and translation scholars into conversation. But it is important not to treat these two fields (or their objects of study) as existing *a priori*. They are contested, and they cohere by virtue of the disciplining habits of their members. That is, they are relatively closed systems: what makes people cultural studies scholars is that they attend cultural studies conferences and publish in cultural studies journals. What marks those conferences or journals as belonging to cultural studies is that cultural studies scholars go or publish there. Likewise for translation studies. These venues foster conversations among like-minded scholars, who share specific preoccupations that motivate them to examine similar objects. Over time, these fields have developed differently in response to their respective preoccupations, and they bring

[8] Bielsa and Bassnett, *Translation in Global News*, p. 18.
[9] Demont-Heinrich, review of *Translation in Global News*, p. 402.
[10] Striphas, "Communication as Translation," p. 234.

different lenses to bear on their objects of study.[11]

Still, there is nothing inherent in either field that would prevent scholars from crossing over. Their closure is only relative, not absolute. There are certainly translation scholars such as Susan Bassnett whose work is shaped by cultural studies.[12] If we use departmental affiliation as an index of disciplinary affiliation, we also find a handful of cultural studies scholars interested in translation.[13] But these scholars are the exception that proves the rule: the paucity of exchange suggests that artificially maintained boundaries remain. If this book serves to encourage conversation, it will do so by revealing the points where each field's grindstones help sharpen the other field's tools.

Teaching and research

This book grows out of the years I have spent teaching in these fields. I'm an unrepentant theorist. I make my students read texts they think are hard. I ask them to read closely and carefully, a practice they often find foreign. I ask them to make claims and stake out a position, a practice they often find uncomfortable. In short, I ask them to argue with me and with the texts we read.

But that approach presumes they understand the texts in the first place, at least enough to have a toe-hold, something to ground their interpretations. This skill can be difficult, but it can be learned. It's complex and involves a range of tools, but the tools are simple enough. For instance, when I taught a master's-level survey of theory at the University of North Dakota, I gave

[11] On this development, see Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," Conway, "Cultural Translation: Two Modes," and Bassnett, "The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies."
[12] For example, Bielsa and Bassnett, *Translation in Global News*.
[13] See, for example, Moran, *New Flows in Global TV*, Rohn, "Lacuna or Universal?," Guldin, "From Transportation to Transformation," and Uribe-Jongbloed and Espinosa-Medina, "A Clearer Picture."

students three steps to follow. As they read each text, I wanted them to look for three things, which I put in the syllabus itself:

- What questions does the author seek to answer?
- What arguments does the author make in answer to those questions?
- What critiques of the author's arguments can we offer?

On the first day of class, I explained that all the people we read had some question in mind they wanted to answer. Sometimes they stated their questions explicitly, but not always. If we could identify them, we could look for the answers they provided in the forms of the arguments they made.

Of the three tasks I gave them, the most difficult, I explained, was the third. *Critique*, in this case, means a wide range of things. Some possibilities include:

- Omission: what else might the author have included or discussed?
- External contradiction: how does the author's argument differ from our experience or from what we observe in the world around us? How does it differ from other theorists' observations?
- Internal contradiction: does the logic of the author's argument contradict itself?

I wanted students to look for internal contradictions, but good writers hid them well. If students couldn't find them, external contradictions were valuable, too. In what way, I wanted to know, was their experience different from what the author argued? And if that was too hard—if they found the authors' account of their experience matched their own—they could always name something the authors left out. No one, I said, talks about radio. Or almost no one. So if they were stumped for a critique, they could always use that, as long as they were prepared to answer

my inevitable follow-up question: what if the authors had talked about radio? What would they have said?

This approach turned theory into a form of *τέχνη* or *technē*, the Greek word that gives us *technique* and *technical* that we might also gloss in this context as "learning-by-doing." Theory is a craft, like learning to play an instrument or learning to paint. Better yet, it's a process by which we cultivate and refine our understanding of the world by testing our explanations of the world against our experience.

I used this question-argument-critique approach for half a dozen years before seeing that there was something else—something deeper—going on. That approach taught students how to read strategically, but it didn't say what theory *was*. So now I begin my classes differently. I define *theory* by giving students three axioms:

1. Theory is an attempt to explain our experience of the world.

2. If the explanation theory offers doesn't match our experience, it's bad theory.

(2a. In the end, it's all bad theory.)

3. We must refine our explanation to replace bad theory with better theory.

The first axiom is easy. We're doing theory when we try to explain the world. There are lots of ways to explain things. Communication theorists span the epistemological spectrum, from positivists anchored in an observable, knowable world to post-structuralists who question the basic assumptions that ground any claims we'd like to make.[14] Because I tend toward the more skeptical end of the spectrum (we can know the world only through the mediation of our senses), I like to qualify my definition of theory: it is our attempt to explain our *experience* of the world.

[14] Craig, "Communication Theory as a Field" and Nastasia and Rakow, "What Is Theory?"

At the same time, we must constantly test that explanation, whatever form it takes. This test leads to the second axiom: when the explanation doesn't match our experience, the theory is bad. But let's not be fooled. This axiom has a corollary: in the end, all theory is bad theory. That is, no explanation is complete. Theory always fails to explain something in the end. Thus the third axiom: our job is to refine our explanations to replace bad theory with better theory. That improved explanation will also fail, of course, and we'll keep refining and refining and refining. In this way, theory and experience mediate each other: theory explains the world we experience even as we test it against that experience. When I ask my students to argue with the authors we read (and with me!), that refinement is what I want them to do.

In simpler terms, the approach I try to teach marks a point where theory and practice intersect. To do theory is to understand (or explain) experience. We understand experience by practicing theory (in both senses of the word *practice*—"application of a trade" and "repetition of a skill"). And for me, the practice of theory takes on another dimension: it's teaching. It's leading students through these steps so they become second nature. It's also learning from students about the nature of theory as *technē*. I didn't start out with the question-argument-critique approach but instead developed it in response to the difficulties my students had when I assumed they understood texts as I did. I had forgotten what it's like to read difficult texts for the first time, and I developed the approach by thinking about how I myself had first encountered them. Similarly, I developed my three axioms in response to the way students worked through questions, arguments, and critiques.

As a result, this book is not a textbook, but it is pedagogical. It isn't a theory textbook in the same way, for instance, as Robert Craig and Heidi Muller's *Theorizing Communication*,

which breaks down theory into traditions and presents classic texts that give students a survey of the field. But it is about thinking and learning, activities in which we professors should be engaged as much as our students.

The parallax view

This book is about teaching and it's about how to change people's minds. It's a tactical guide whose two parts are linked by the challenge of opening people up to the possibility of seeing the world differently. Many of my students don't like theory (or *think* they don't) because they see no place for it in their lives. They come into my class filled with dread that I'll drone on and on about arcane knowledge that might as well be in a foreign language where they need to know just enough words to get by. My job is to help them recognize their unspoken assumptions about how the world works, in particular in relation to phenomena of communication. My job is also to help them see that their common sense understanding of communication is inadequate. They have been theorizing communication all along, every time they explain some interaction where two people try to exchange information or persuade each other, to give two obvious examples. Inevitably, their explanations—their theories—miss something, and I want to provide tools to help them refine their understanding of what is going on.

In short, I want to help them observe something they might not have had any reason to observe before, namely their interpretive horizon, or those very assumptions that ground how they understand the world. ("Interpretive horizon" is a metaphor. Think of the horizon you see when you're outside. You probably don't pay much attention to it, but the things you do notice stand out because you see them against that horizon. It is in contrast to that horizon that they

become visible. An interpretive horizon functions in the same way. You make assumptions about the world that are so basic you rarely think of them as such, but the things you do notice make sense because you see them against those assumptions or that horizon.) The task of cultural translation is the same: to prompt people to see what otherwise remains invisible, those basic conceptual building blocks that are so fundamental they fail to see them at all. Not that cultural translation is a type of education. To presume that it is, and to presume that I have some privileged view of the world, would be patronizing. Instead, cultural translation and teaching are examples of a broader phenomenon, that of our engagement with our own interpretive horizons.

I approach this task through the idea of a parallax view. The term comes from the Greek word *παράλλαξις*, meaning "alternation." It refers to the way a set of objects looks different depending on the perspective of the viewer. Imagine you're walking down a street, and you spot a cool mural painted on the side of a building. Between you and the mural is a pole and a large silver shed. You continue to walk to get a better view. The shed, because it's closer to you, moves quickly out of your way. The pole, farther from you than the shed but not as far as the mural, doesn't appear to move as quickly. So you keep walking, and it too moves out of your way. The mural, the farthest of these three objects from you, doesn't appear to move much at all, at least in relation to the shed and the pole. The three objects don't change position in relation to each other, but your perception of them does. That change in perspective is the parallax view.

Figure 0.2. Parallax view

(The mural I photographed in these images is one of my favorites. It was created by Joel Jonientz, a friend of mine in Grand Forks, North Dakota. It depicts Fatty Arbuckle, a silent movie star from the 1910s. Pay special attention to the frames on the bottom left and right—they provide a parallax view.)

Figure 0.3. Fatty Arbuckle

This approach is useful for understanding a wide range of phenomena because we can walk around other objects, too, so to speak. Consider the heroes in *Star Wars*.[15] In *A New Hope*, the film that started the franchise in 1977, we root for the ragtag team of rebels as they fight the darkly powerful Empire, which in its hubris has built the Death Star, a battle station designed to destroy entire planets. We identify with the rebels, as retired U.S. Air Force Lieutenant Colonel William Astore writes: "Like most young Americans then [in 1977, when *A New Hope* was released], I saw myself as a plucky rebel, a mixture of the free-wheeling, wisecracking Han Solo and the fresh-faced, idealistic Luke Skywalker."[16] But the truth is that almost everyone sees himself or herself in that role, even people on opposite sides of a conflict. Roy Scranton, a U.S. Army veteran who served in Iraq, writes of spending one Fourth of July "on the roof of a

[15] Lucas, *Star Wars*.
[16] Astore, "Can You Spot the Military in Your Favorite Sci-Fi Film?"

building in Baghdad that had once belonged to Saddam Hussein's secret police." He was thinking of *Star Wars*, and as he looked out over Baghdad, he came to see himself as he imagined Iraqis might see him: "I was the faceless storm trooper, and the scrappy rebels were the Iraqis."[17] Perspective is important.

Strategies of misreading

So how do we walk around *ideas* to see them anew? How do we come to see our world so it appears a little bit off? We start by recognizing something fundamental about the texts we read.[18] We cannot know an author's mind. We cannot know an author's intention. Although the words the author has written might seem to represent his or her intention, they are open to interpretation. Words mean too many things. Or as Paul Ricoeur explains,

> When I speak, I realize only a part of the potential signified; the rest is erased by the total signification of the sentence, which operates as the unit of speaking. But the rest of the semantic possibilities are not canceled; they float around the words as possibilities not completely eliminated.[19]

What *can* we know, in that case? We can know the words we have in front of us, words that are assembled into a concrete, stable form. And we can know what others have said about them (although, there, too, we can know only *what* they've said, not their intentions). To walk around the text—better yet, to walk around the ideas—it is enough to offer an interpretation that is at once consistent with it but different from how others have responded. That is, our strategy should be to misread a text by reading against the interpretations that people have had before. We

[17] Scranton, "'Star Wars' and the Fantasy of American Violence."
[18] My analysis in this section is indebted to Sarah Maitland's *What Is Cultural Translation?*
[19] Ricoeur, "The Problem of Double Meaning as Hermeneutic Problem and as Semantic Problem," p. 71.

must misread strategically, so that misreading becomes a more sophisticated type of cultural translation. It is a more strategic type of exchange than in my illustration above, one that has value when one of the people in our exchange is resistant to the idea that things might be other than he or she imagines them.

That is the exercise I undertake in the rest of this book. In chapter 1, I misread Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding." Hall was concerned with a common sense way of thinking about television, one related to the classic sender-message-receiver model of communication. He read against this model in ways that were influential for the entire field of media and cultural studies, where scholars have spent a lot of effort to look at how viewers decode television. I read against those scholars to arrive at a new interpretation of "Encoding/Decoding," namely that every time we speak or write, we are in fact translating. We are substituting one use of a word (ours) for another (that of the person we're talking to). This misreading serves two purposes: it simultaneously authorizes and illustrates the strategy I advocate.

Thus the first chapter focuses on communication theory in order to show how misreading can be a conceptual tool. The second chapter looks for theory in an unexpected place: George Orwell's treatise on language, appended to his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. If my misreading of Hall suggests ways cultural translation can open new horizons, my misreading of Orwell—not as a novel with a treatise on language appended but as a translation manual with a novel appended—shows how it can also shut them down.

The chapters that follow are about using the tools we have developed. Chapter 3 describes how people have pushed others to see the world in new, constructive ways, especially through art. It focuses on a Russian artist who shocks his audiences by subjecting himself to

great pain in very public performances, giving them a new perspective to ground their view of the world (and changing the minds even of the cops sent to arrest him). His tactic is conceptually simple: he asks viewers to reconsider their ideas about his actions, some of which break the law, in light of a different higher-order principle—to see them in the context of ethics rather than crime and punishment. Chapter 4 describes the opposite: it is about perspective unmoored. It is about the odd path taken by the phrase *fake news* after the 2016 U.S. election. In the days following the vote, it described stories that were made up. People spoke of fake news as a way to encourage others to pay attention real news—to things that actually happened. But the new president of the United States quickly took the phrase and used it to evoke something different. He used it whenever he disagreed with a story, creating a space of extreme relativism, where the criteria people used to evaluate claims about the world had less to do with evidence and more to do whether they agreed politically with the people making the claims.

Finally, the last chapter returns to where the book began. It offers a metatheoretical account of the performative dimensions of my argument. It proposes an epistemology of jumping-in: if theory is a foreign language, the best way to learn it is through immersion, where even if we don't have all the tools we need, necessity helps us discover them as we go. (Not coincidentally, cultural translation is also best understand from the standpoint of this epistemology of jumping-in.) It's for that reason that throughout the book, I try to provoke as much as to explain. I give examples to encourage an inductive form of reasoning so students will do the work of connecting ideas themselves. Thus in the conclusion I look first at the ways this book develops an explanation of communication and second at applications of the tools it develops. I want to help students see how theory encourages a parallax view of the world, not to

mention communication. The final chapter connects the dots, from beginning to end, and then turns students loose.

1

Communication Is Translation (So Please Mind the Gap)

What you are reading is a translation. It began as a lesson in one of my classes, replete with slides, and now I have turned it into a book chapter.

No, that is not right. It began much earlier. My lesson reworked a keynote talk I gave at a conference, and my keynote reworked an opaque theoretical article I published in the *International Journal of Communication*.[1] And that article reworked Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model to see what it had to reveal about translation. (For that matter, so does what you are reading.) And Hall's model reworked Marx's take on political economy in the *Grundrisse*. (And the *Grundrisse* reworked older versions of political economy, which themselves reworked...which reworked...which reworked...)

In other words, there is no point of origin. What you are reading is the result of one long series of transformations and substitutions: encoding/decoding substitutes for the *Grundrisse*; my article substitutes for encoding/decoding; my keynote substitutes for my article; my lesson substitutes for my keynote; and now, what you are reading substitutes for my lesson. It is a translation. It could not be otherwise.

[1] Conway, "Encoding/Decoding as Translation." But even this is not quite right. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in the journal *Palabra Clave* 20, no. 3 (2017).

It is no coincidence I'm describing it as a translation. My purpose in this chapter is to demonstrate the strategy of the parallax view by asking what would happen if cultural studies scholars talked about translation. Or, more to the point, what would a theory of translation look like if it were grounded in the field of cultural studies? The answer I give is as performative as it is expository. That is, the logic that shapes my answer also applies to the essay itself, in that it shapes its form. My essay—like every other form of discourse—participates in an economy of substitution that I am calling translation. In that respect, my opening examples are strategic: they show how translation works before I even say what I think it is. The examples I choose in the sections that follow are also strategic: they illustrate a key relationship between signs by moving between semiotic systems (for example, between words and pictures or between formal and informal linguistic registers).

So what, then, is that relationship? What exactly is translation? To answer that question, I propose three axioms:

1. To use a sign is to transform it.
2. To transform a sign is to translate it.
3. Communication is translation.

In the following sections, I approach these axioms by providing two parallax views. I begin by describing an early model of communication—the sender-message-receiver model—developed by electrical engineers in the 1940s as a way to improve the telephone networks they were building. Then, to work through these axioms, I peer at the sender-message-receiver model from a different angle, the one provided by Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding."[2] It serves as the basis

[2] Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse" and Hall, "Encoding/Decoding."

for a materialist approach to semiotics, which in turn provides the conceptual tools to take a new look at "Encoding/Decoding" itself. The point is to pry open the act of speaking and responding to see how signs are transformed when we use them. Taking my cues from Hall, whose essay has had a profound impact on scholarly notions of politics, I finish by offering a related conjecture: the transformation and substitution of signs opens up a space for a politics of invention, where we can rethink our relation to cultural others so that people we once feared can find their place in the communities we claim as our own.

Sender-message-receiver

One of the most influential models of communication developed from efforts by electrical engineers in the 1940s to find ways to make telephones work better. They were asking a technical question, namely how to overcome the noise that interfered with the transmission of information, especially as telephone lines got longer and noise increased. They wanted to calculate the point where signals were transmitted with maximum efficiency, but they had to balance efficiency with redundancy. The most efficient transmission would be one where each element of a message is sent once, but only once. The problem is that the channels used for transmission introduce extraneous signals. If each element is sent only once, the receiver has no way to know whether it has been corrupted because there is no way to confirm that the message received is right. (The receiver would have to ask "Did you say...?" and then repeat the message, thus sending it more than once.) Think of the children's game of telephone, where one person whispers a message to a second, who whispers it to a third, who whispers it to a fourth, and so on. It's an efficient system (each person whispers the message once), but the message the last

person receives is always garbled. And since there is no feedback from one person to the next, the last person cannot know for sure whether (or where) it is garbled until the first person tells everyone what he or she said.

One solution to this problem is to build in different forms of redundancy, especially in the form of feedback, although doing so makes the transmission less efficient. Imagine again our game of telephone. If the second person repeated the message back to the first, making sure to get it exactly right, and then the third person repeated it back to the second, and the fourth to the third, and so on, the message would likely be less garbled when it arrived, but it would take much longer for it to work its way down the line.

To solve the problems they faced in the 1940s, engineers proposed the sender-message-receiver model. Claude Shannon published the first iteration in 1948, which Warren Weaver helped popularize in the years that followed. A transmitter, they said, transforms information into a message that can be sent through a channel like a copper wire. The receiver then transforms the message back into its original form. Or, to use Weaver's terms, "[T]he function of the transmitter is to encode, and that of the receiver to decode, the message."[3] But just as in the example above, no transmission is exact. There is always noise, and it takes feedback from the receiver to the transmitter to be confident the information is transmitted correctly, or at least that any corruption is kept to a minimum, as Shannon showed with a set of mathematical formulas for determining the optimal levels of efficiency and redundancy.

[3] Weaver, "The Mathematics of Communication," p. 13.

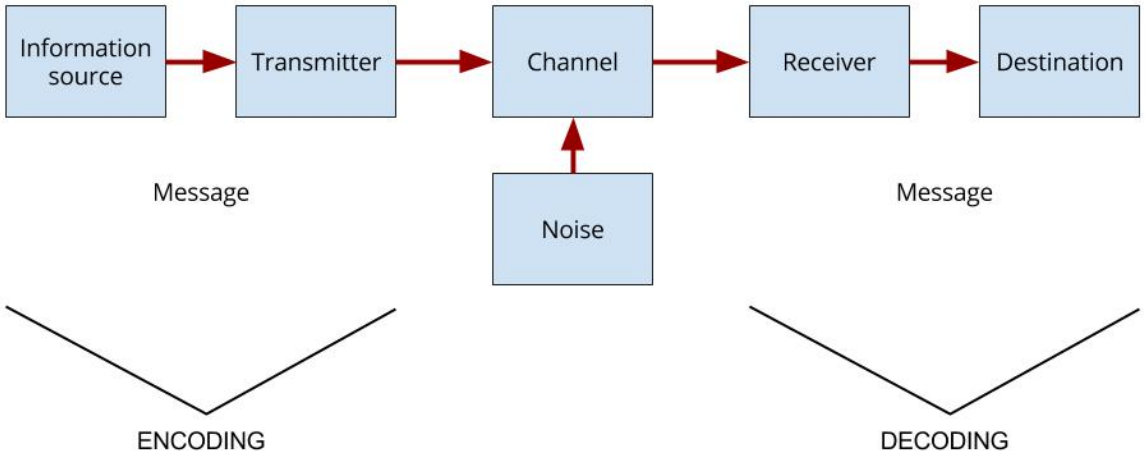

Figure 1.1. Sender-message-receiver model (adapted from Shannon and Weaver)

Although this model has been influential in communication theory, it has drawbacks. The most important, from a cultural studies point of view, is that the "semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering problem."[4] In other words, Shannon was concerned only with the reliable transmission of information, which for him, could be any set of symbols, whether they were imbued with meaning or not. He was not concerned with content, which could be "fsd jklrwiouv kldf sa" (a string of letters I produced by smashing my fingers on the keyboard) just as well as "To sleep, perchance to Dream." In either case, the engineering problem remained the same. (Weaver, to be fair, did address the possibility of meaning in his efforts to popularize Shannon's model. "The formal diagram of a communication system," he wrote, "can, in all likelihood, be extended to include the central issues of meaning and effectiveness."[5])

The question of meaning would be Stuart Hall's point of departure, the pivot around

[4] Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," p. 379.
[5] Weaver, "The Mathematics of Communication," p. 14.

which he would walk to see the sender-message-receiver model from a new perspective.

Theoretical foundations: a materialist approach to semiotics

The axioms I propose above have two starting points: materialism and semiotics. The materialism comes, as mentioned in the introduction, from Stuart Hall's reaction to the sender-message-receiver model in essay "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," better known in its revised form, "Encoding/Decoding." Hall argues that television programs are only one moment in a circuit that links producers and viewers in a specific social context. The meaning with which they imbue a program is grounded in this context.

The encoding/decoding model, in fact, is an application of Marx's political economy, as laid out in his introduction to the *Grundrisse*.[6] Marx's insight was that production and consumption were not independent moments in the circulation of commodities but were, on the contrary, mutually constitutive—one could not exist without the other. On the one hand, to give an example, the objects a cobbler produces become a pair of shoes in a meaningful sense only when someone puts them on his or her feet. In this way, the act of consumption is implicated in the act of production. On the other, the cobbler produces shoes in such a way as to influence how people wear them, by altering materials and styles to create a demand. In this way, production is implicated in the act of consumption.

Hall extends this analysis to television. He describes the moments of production and consumption—"encoding" and "decoding"—as mutually constitutive. (Note the common language with Shannon and Weaver.) Producers encode certain meanings into shows, but viewers

[6] Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*.

do not necessary decode them as intended. Nonetheless, the moments of production and consumption are linked in that producers anticipate viewers' reactions, and viewers interpret shows in part based on their knowledge of producers. Thus the shows themselves are complex signs that link producers and viewers, who also operate within a shared social context.

In short, production and consumption are linked in a relationship of mutual dependence. Hall frames these forms of mutual influence as a circuit, which he illustrates in the figure below:

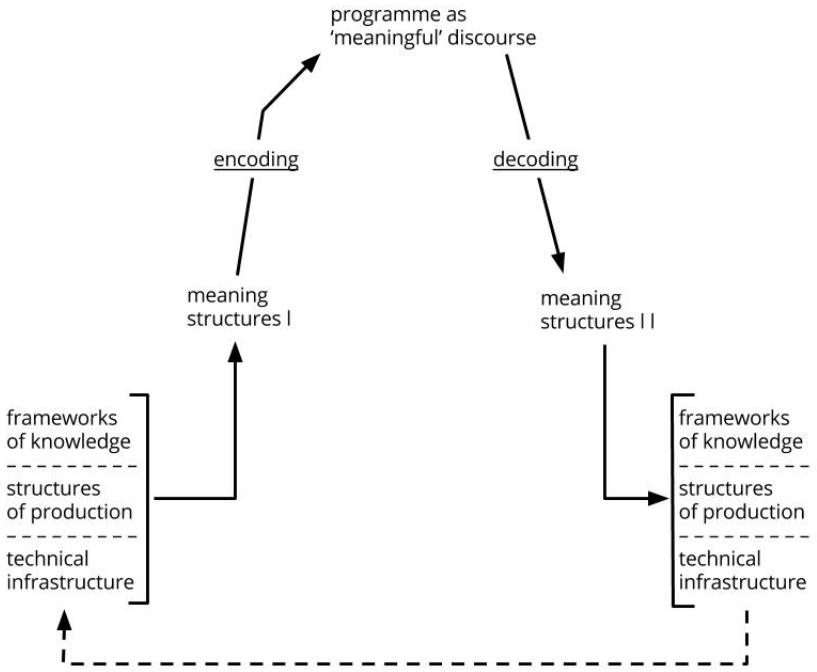

Figure 1.2. Encoding/decoding model (adapted from Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse")

Note that I have adapted the figure Hall presents in the earlier version of his essay (from 1973), which differs from its better known counterpart (in "Encoding/Decoding" from 1980) in one

important way: it has an arrow that runs from the factors that influence decoding to those that influence encoding. In other words, it completes the circuit by making the influence of decoding on encoding explicit.

Also note the way Hall's diagram looks like the sender-message-receiver model, but all stretched out and twisted. Shannon and Weaver were concerned with how a channel transmitted information. Hall is concerned with how a program becomes a channel, or better yet a medium, for transmitting meaning. But he also draws the idea of transmission into question. Shannon and Weaver were concerned with the steps a transmitter took to encode information and the steps the receiver took to decode it. Hall breaks the moments of transmission and reception down by looking at the factors that shape them, related to people's frameworks of knowledge, the structures of production in which they are embedded, and the technical infrastructure available to them. By peering at the sender-message-receiver model from a different angle, one where meaning predominates, he helps us see that Shannon and Weaver's primary question—how can we transmit information with the least distortion?—is not the right question at all.

Hall's attention to the factors that influence encoding and decoding, which all relate to the material conditions of textual production and meaning-making, is what makes his model materialist. Nevertheless, the psychological aspects of meaning—how programs evoke ideas for viewers—remain unclear. Hence my second starting point, the idea of a sign. Here I draw on American philosopher Charles Peirce who says,

> A sign ... is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an

> equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign.[7]

Consider my stick-figure heroes in Figure 1.3 below. The star spoken by Hero 1 (on the left) is the sign because it evokes something for Hero 2 (on the right). And the ideas it evokes for Hero 2 are also signs, as they evoke still more ideas, which evoke more, and more, and more. (My image cannot capture the full chain of associations.) This is what Peirce means when he speaks of the interpretant.[8]

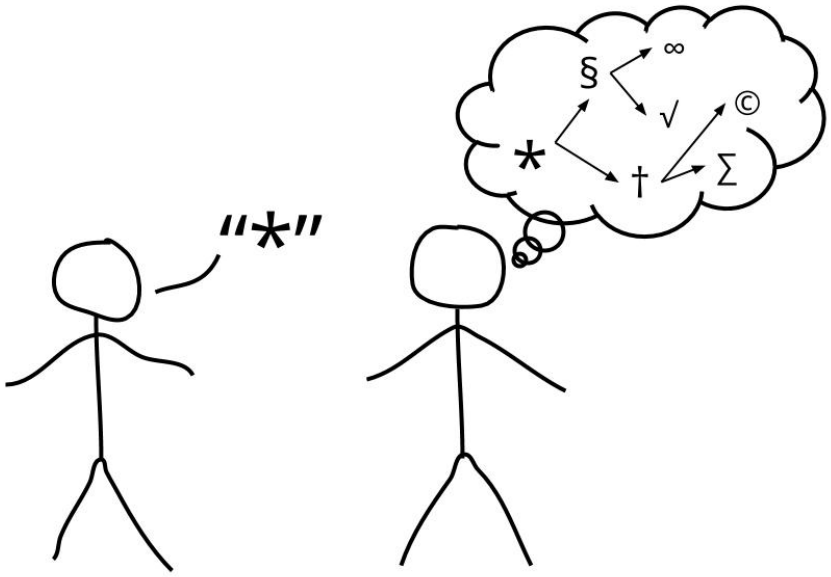

Figure 1.3. Sign and interpretant

It is useful to make a distinction here between the material and subjective aspects of the sign. On the one hand, there is the material side—the specific patterns of vibrating sound that hit

[7] Peirce, *The Philosophy of Peirce*, p 99.
[8] If my heroes bring to mind Randall Munroe's brilliant webcomic xkcd (xkcd.com), then they are signs and xkcd is their interpretant.

our eardrums in the case of a word, for instance, or the patterns of light and sound in the case of a television program, or Hero 1's star. On the other, there is the subjective side—what a speaker or producer hopes to evoke by using a given material sign (a word, a TV program, etc.), and what that material sign evokes for a listener or viewer, as in the case of Hero 2's chain of associations. The subjective aspect of the sign consists in the string of interpretants evoked by the material sign.

Axiom 1: To use a sign is to transform it

How does a materialist approach drawn from Marx's political economy and 1970s-era reactions to a 1940s-era engineering problem relate to the idea of a sign made up of material and subjective parts? As Hall demonstrates, the televisual sign links producers and viewers. Its meaning is a point of negotiation between them, which is shaped by their knowledge and expectations of each other. But this negotiation over meaning is not unique to television. V.N. Vološinov, in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, argues that we negotiate the meaning of every sign. He gives the example of a word:

> [A] word presents itself not as an item of vocabulary but as a word that has been used in a wide variety of utterances by co-speaker A, co-speaker B, co-speaker C and so on, and has been variously used in the speaker's own utterances.[9]

So when Hero 1 on the left uses a sign...

[9] Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, p. 70.

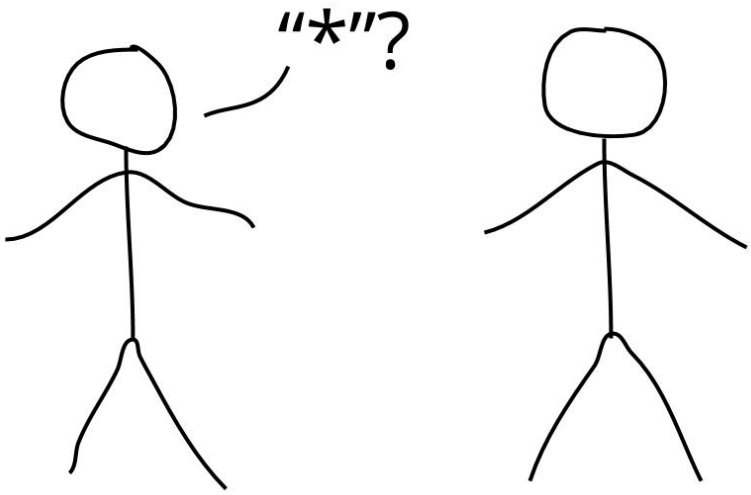

Figure 1.4. Hero 1 asks a question

...Hero 2 on the right responds by taking into account how Hero 1 used it. If Hero 2 uses it again, it is with the earlier exchange in mind, at least partially.

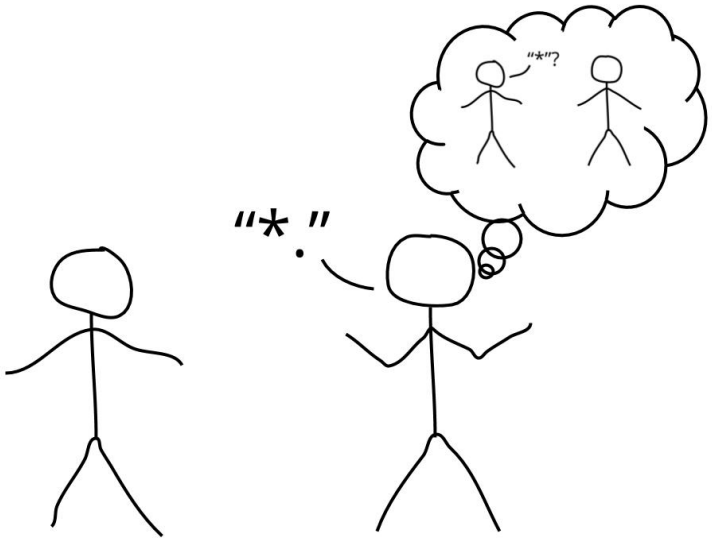

Figure 1.5. Hero 2 answers

But we are more than just reactive: when we talk to people, we are also predictive. As Mikhail Bakhtin points out:

> When constructing my utterance, I try actively to determine this response. Moreover, I try to act in accordance with the response I anticipate, so this anticipated response, in turn, exerts an active influence on my utterance (I parry objections that I foresee, I make all kinds of provisos, and so forth).[10]

In other words, just as TV producers (according to Hall) shape their programs in partial anticipation of what viewers will think, we shape our utterances (whatever form they might take) in partial anticipation of how others will react. (And we do so in a given social context, to return to Hall's model.)

Thus our heroes continue to pass a word back and forth, each time reacting to what the other has said and taking that reaction into account. Perhaps they have a discussion. Perhaps Hero 2 is really a jerk, or maybe just clumsy with Hero 1's feelings. Maybe Hero 2 is not really a hero at all:

[10] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, p. 95.

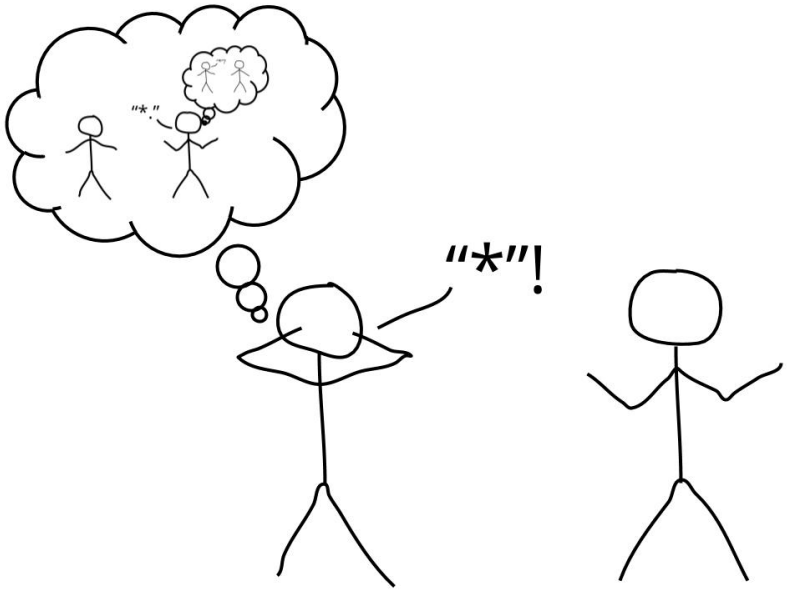

Figure 1.6. Hero 1 thinks Hero 2 is a jerk

So Hero 1 leaves, while Hero 2 calls after Hero 1 in vain:

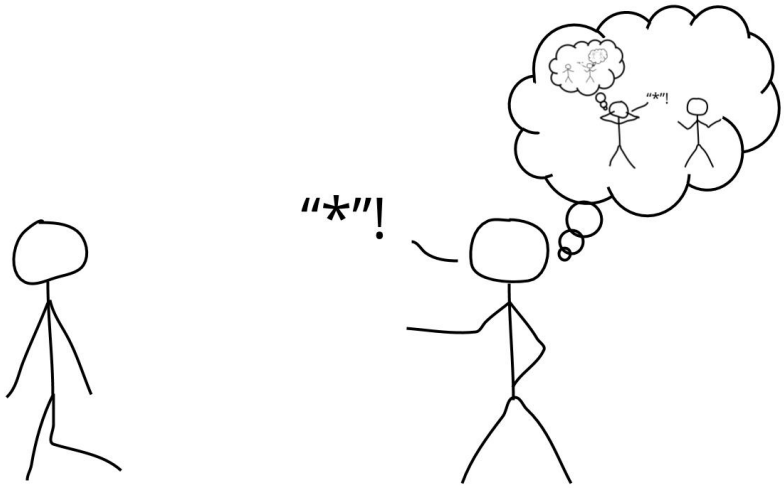

Figure 1.7. Hero 1 has had enough, and Hero 2 objects

And finally Hero 2 is left to replay the scene, to figure out what went wrong. The sign means something for Hero 2 that it did not mean before. At the beginning of the conversation, it did not evoke regret or puzzlement, and now it does.

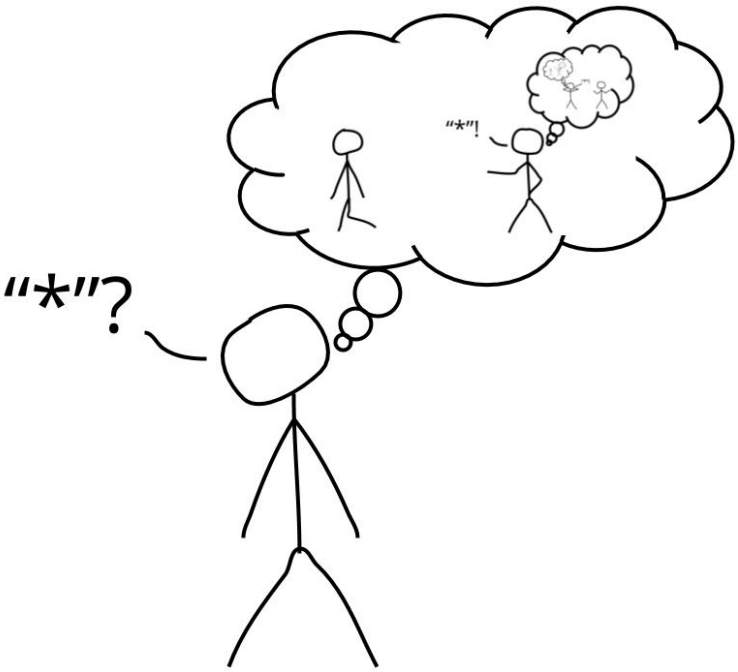

Figure 1.8. Hero 2 asks what went wrong

This is what I mean when I say "to use a sign is to transform it." The material aspect of a sign may remain the same over the course of an exchange, but the subjective aspect does not. And if the material aspect is one side of a sign, and the subjective aspect the other, then the pair has changed. The sign—the pair together, as a unit—is different from what it was before.

Axiom 2: To transform a sign is to translate it

Hence my second axiom: to transform a sign is to translate it.

Perhaps this axiom appears counter-intuitive or based on a notion of *translation* that I have had to wrangle and contort. In fact, the opposite is true. What do I mean by *translation*? Exactly what it means in a conventional sense—the substitution of one sign (or one set of signs) for another. In the typical case, this substitution is made based on ideas of equivalence, or something approaching it. The idea of equivalence is contested in translation studies (no language maps neatly onto another), but it is a useful and necessary fiction. We cannot substitute words willy-nilly, debates about equivalence notwithstanding, because if we did, we would no longer be giving readers an idea of what a text in a foreign language says. Hence, when Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay on the translator's task quotes Stéphane Mallarmé, who speaks of "Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs," there are many different ways we could render his phrase in English, but they will all have to mention something like "Languages, imperfect due to sheer number."[11]

Figure 1.9. Translation in a conventional sense

This definition of translation remains relevant here. We transform signs by using them: their subjective dimension changes because Hero 2 has to take into account the use by Hero 1, something Hero 1 did not have to do. Thus the transformed sign substitutes for the sign that came

[11] Benjamin, "The Translator's Task," p. 160.

before. The change might be small (in fact, most of the time it is), but we can also imagine more dramatic cases, such as when Hero 1 tells Hero 2 something life-changing, and Hero 2 must make sense of a new configuration of his or her semiotic universe. (Think of Luke Skywalker in *The Empire Strikes Back*.[12] The sign *father* changes dramatically when he learns who Darth Vader really is.)

Or think of how the sign *translation* has changed for you since the beginning of this chapter. As you think of questions you want to ask and points you want me to clarify, you are taking into account what I have said. The chain of associations—that is, the interpretants—the sign *translation* evokes for you has grown. Perhaps not dramatically, but it is larger nonetheless. The subjective aspect of the sign has changed, which means the material/subjective pair as a unit has changed. I have substituted one use of the term for an older use. At the risk of being too clever, I would say I have translated *translation*.

Axiom 3: Communication is translation

Here we arrive at my third axiom: "Communication is translation." In all truth, the first two axioms form a syllogism, from which the third derives. If we use a sign, we transform it. If we transform a sign, we translate it. Therefore, if we use a sign—that is, if we communicate—we translate it. In other words (what a revealing phrase—"in other words"), communication is translation.

In some ways, this assertion is not new. George Steiner, in his influential book *After Babel*, argued,

[12] Lucas, *The Empire Strikes Back*.

> Any model of communication is at the same time a model of translation, of a vertical or horizontal transfer of significance. No two historical epochs, no two social classes, no two localities use words and syntax to signify the same things, to send identical signals of valuation and inference. Neither do two human beings.[13]

Paul Ricoeur, in his book *On Translation*, goes further. Because the sign I use never evokes the exact same thing for you as for me, we constantly misunderstand each other. We say what we have to say, but then we also have to explain what we mean. Sometimes we have to explain our explanation, until we are as satisfied as we can be that we have gotten our message through:

> [I]t is always possible *to say the same thing in another way* ... That is why we have never ceased making ourselves clear, making ourselves clear with words and sentences, making ourselves clear to others who do not see things from the same angle as we do.[14]

Language is reflexive, and *tant mieux*—if we could not talk about what we mean, especially when we see our point has not gotten through, communication would grind to a halt.

Note, however, that Steiner and Ricoeur make an assumption that I do not. They presume there is an active agent, someone thinking about the meaning of signs, in that they are explaining, "When I said X, what I really meant was..." In effect, they are translating X by "say[ing] the same thing in another way." But if each use of a sign transforms it, then there is no need for an active agent. Transformation and translation take place whether we think about what

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[13] Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 47.
[14] Ricoeur, *On Translation*, p. 25–27.

signs mean or not. Hero 1 says "*" and Hero 2 adds that use to his series of interpretants, so when Hero 2 says "*" it is not an identical sign.

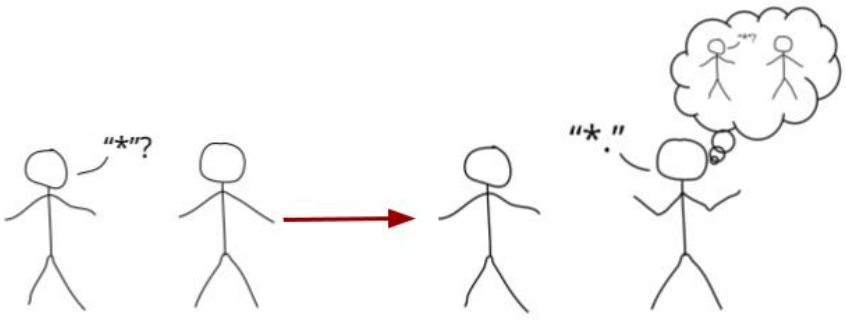

Figure 1.10. Translation as transformative substitution

Conjecture: A politics of invention

Why dwell on this seemingly minor point? Because as Stuart Hall showed with television, the gap between the producer's intended meaning and the meaning a show evokes for a viewer is the condition of possibility for acts of resistance. Because we are intelligent human beings, and because we have our own experience which differs from that of the people who produce television, we do not have to agree with what we see on TV. In fact, we can take what we see and arrive at radically different—and equally plausible—interpretations, as we reconfigure meanings to match with our experience and meet our expectations.

That idea of resistance leads me to my conjecture: the gap between signs is productive, something we can put to use. We must (as the London Underground reminds us) mind the gap. I have begun to investigate this conjecture as both a theoretical and an empirical question. In particular, I am interested in how we use language to invent ways to welcome strangers into our

midst. How do Canadians, for instance, persuade their compatriots to vote for a party whose leader, Justin Trudeau, wants to welcome Syrian refugees? How do politicians frame "refugees" in order to persuade voters not only that welcoming refugees is the right thing to do but also that voting for them is the right way to do it? (An interesting question to pose, given the contrast with the political scene in Canada's neighbor to the south—and my country of origin—the United States.)

Such questions are at the heart of what rhetoricians, drawing on Aristotle, describe as invention. In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle says that rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and invention is the ability to "[apprehend] the possible means of persuasion in any given case" and to find the right words accordingly.[15] Invention in this sense is contingent on circumstances, which change from one situation to the next. It is grounded in the moment of speaking and therefore not knowable in advance. It is a matter of thinking on your toes.

My contention—my conjecture—is that the gap between a speaker's sign and a listener's sign is a space where we can practice a specific type of invention concerned with hospitality. This gap allows us to speak against the hegemonic norms of identity that prevent people who appear different or foreign from joining "our" group, whichever it is. It is a matter of identifying the "available means of persuasion." This act is a fundamentally creative—and fundamentally ethical—act.

Let me illustrate with an example, which comes from Bertolt Brecht, by way of translation studies scholars Boris Buden and Stefan Nowotny.[16] In his poem "The Democratic Judge," Brecht describes an Italian immigrant to the United States who is applying for

[15] Aristotle, *Selected Works*, p. 622.
[16] Buden and Nowotny, "Cultural Translation: An Introduction to the Problem."

citizenship, but he does not speak English. The man stands before the judge, and the judge asks him questions about the United States, as part of a citizenship test. "What is the eighth amendment?" the judge asks. "1492," he answers because he does not understand.

The setting of the exchange is symbolically important. The applicant is asking for admission into a new national community. It is the culmination of a long process of asking—from immigration, to integration (in different senses, as he does not speak English), to finally making a formal request. Thus when he is refused, according to Buden and Nowotny, it is a literal refusal of his symbolic request, one more refusal on top of all the others he has faced since arriving in his new home.

So the man returns later, and the judge asks another question. "Who was the winning general of the Civil War?"

Again the man answers, "1492." Again, he is refused.

He returns a third time, and the scene repeats itself. "How long do presidents serve?" "1492."

But something happens for the judge. It is a moment of invention. When the man returns a fourth time, according to Brecht:

> The judge, who liked the man, realised that he could not
>
> Learn the new language, asked him
>
> How he earned his living and was told: by hard work. And so
>
> At his fourth appearance the judge gave him the question:
>
> When
>
> Was America discovered? And on the strength of his correctly answering

1492, he was granted his citizenship.[17]

The judge looks at the situation and assesses it. He looks at the tools available to him. He is a judge, so he cannot break the law, but he takes pity on the man and decides the United States would be better for having him as a citizen. Given those constraints, he contrives a question—one that is in line with all those he has already asked, although today it would be a bit anachronistic—that the man can answer. The judge has worked within the constraints imposed on him to make a stranger no longer strange, a new member of the national community.

Buden and Nowotny say that the judge has found "a correct question" for "a wrong answer."[18] The judge has taken advantage of the gap between one use of the sign "1492" and the next. Over the course of his interactions with the man, the sign "1492" has come to have a richer set of interpretants. In each case, but especially in the question that sets up the final, "correct" use, he has taken his previous interactions with the man into account. Hence the expanded set of associations. What is important is that the judge finds a way to make the evolution of the sign's meaning productive—it becomes a tool in an ethical act of inclusion.

[17] Brecht, quoted in Buden and Nowotny, "Cultural Translation," p. 206–207.
[18] Buden and Nowotny, "Cultural Translation," p. 207.

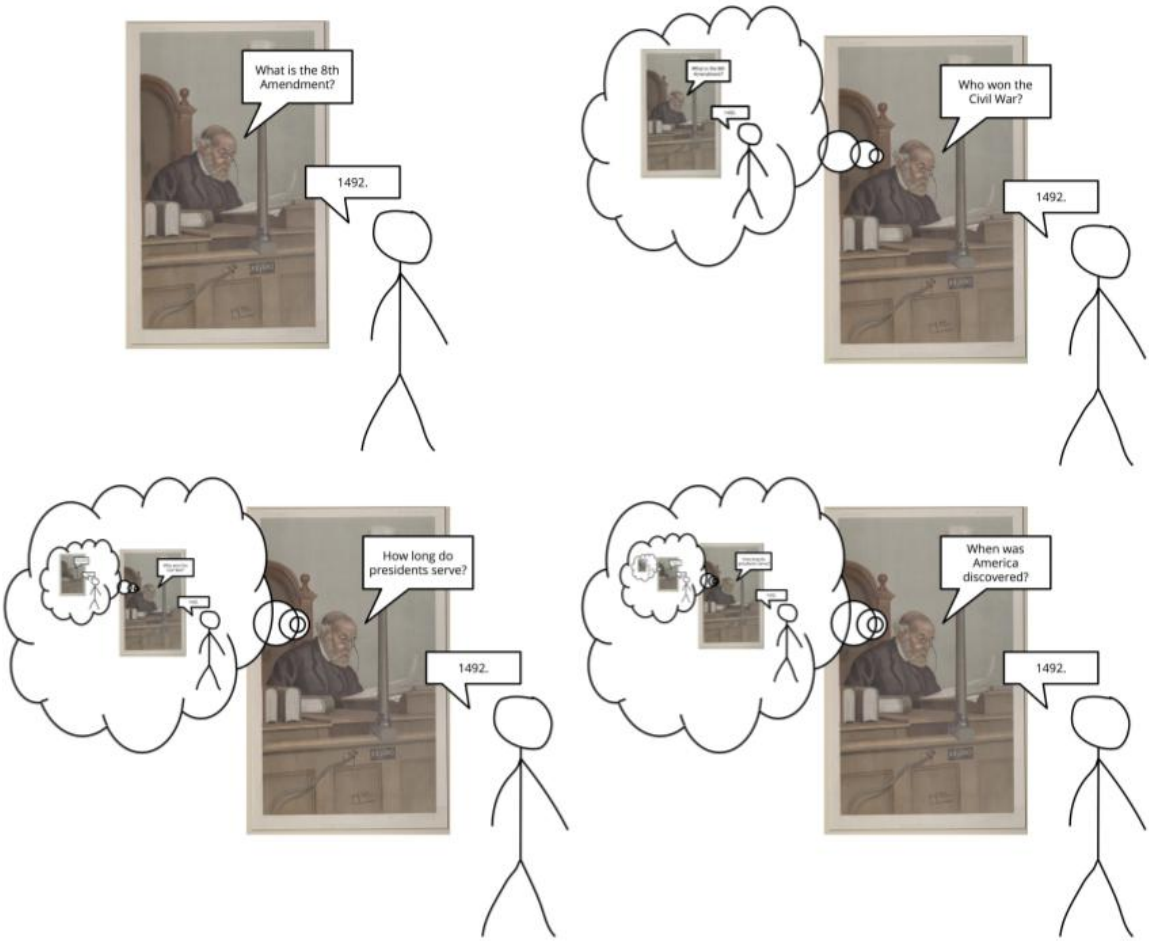

Figure 1.11. Brecht's judge devises the correct question for a wrong answer[19]

It is not hard to think of other situations where such invention has value, or where scholars can use this idea to gain insight into our interactions with groups who are marked as "different" or "foreign." How do politicians in Canada and the United States, to return to the questions I posed above, use words like *refugee* in such a way as to persuade voters to accept people fleeing war? How do they encourage voters to associate ideas such as opportunity or hospitality with the word *refugee*? What role do signs play in the symbolic universe through which politicians and voters

[19] The image of the judge is modified from "Men of the Day No.756: Caricature of Mr Franklin Lushington (1823–1901)" in Vanity Fair (source: Wikimedia Commons). It is in the public domain.

navigate, and how can they find ways to understand these newcomers so that they no longer remain others?

Conclusion

In this chapter's introduction, I wrote that what you are reading is a translation, a reworking of a lesson, which reworked an article, which reworked...which reworked...which reworked... Why have I made the same argument more than once? What is the value of the repetition? What does this version offer that older versions (or past links in the chain) did not?

One answer to these questions is relatively superficial. My earlier elaboration[20] relied on a deductive mode of reasoning. It was a series of literal and implied "if-then" statements. I crafted the version you have just read to rely more on induction—I proceed by examples and build to my conclusions from there. I hope this version achieves a different effect—I hope it left blanks that you filled in. In short, I hope it demonstrated invention as much as explained it.

Another answer goes still further. In this chapter's introduction I also asked, *What would a theory of translation look like if it were grounded in the field of cultural studies? The answer I give is as performative as it is expository. That is, the logic that shapes my answer also applies to the essay itself, and it shapes its form.* How does this logic apply? This question and these statements are signs, by Peirce's definition, in that they "stand to somebody for something in some respect or capacity." Their use here differs from their use in my introduction, if I have succeeded in my translation, because they evoke something new for you. The first time, I had

[20] Conway, "Encoding/Decoding as Translation."

hinted at but not laid out the logic of transformation-substitution. You had to take my assertion on faith. Now, I hope, it stands on its own merits.

This logic is what authorizes the theoretical moves I make in the following chapters. The parallax views I produce depend on the multiplicity of meanings of any given sign, which comes about because of the transformation signs undergo with each use. We can gaze at meaning from another angle because signs always mean more than what the people who use them intend, a semiotic excess that provides an excess of perspectives, if we choose to explore them.

In sum, the questions of invention that follow from this conception of translation are ones I think we should be asking in the field of cultural studies. If we develop a theory of translation that responds to our concerns, and if we bring the tools we have developed to bear on such a theory, we can conceive new approaches to politics and ethics. In a world where the forces of globalization are constantly accelerating, and where we come into greater and greater contact with people unlike ourselves, few tasks could be as important as this one.

But nothing guarantees our success, and as I write in the next chapter, the same logic of transformation-substitution can close off the very potential that invention seems to open up.

2

George Orwell's Newspeak as a Manual for Translation

The last chapter ends on a hopeful note: cultural translation is the tool we use to shift people's perspectives so they see the world differently. It's a technique for opening a space where we can welcome people who aren't like us, whom we've excluded in the past.

But there's a risk in that perception. It leaves open the question of who "we" are. I'm presuming my readers are like me in that they want to overcome the divisions we impose upon the world when we separate people into categories like *us* and *them*. That assumption is false. If recent politics has shown anything, it's that people are worried about outsiders causing them to lose their identity. They want to maintain those categories. The Front national in France, the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs in Austria, Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, and the UK Independence Party in Great Britain have all made electoral gains by appealing to nativist sentiments and exploiting people's fears of outsiders.[1]

There's a second risk to consider. The processes of transformation described in the last chapter work in more than one direction. Cultural translation—the replacement of one sign by another—can close down the potential for exchange, too. It can make oppression possible. It can exclude.

[1] See Conway, "Modern Hospitality."

This chapter is about that second direction. It's about George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which tells the story of a man's struggle in a dystopian future where free thought is no longer possible, having been undermined by linguistic engineering, probing surveillance, and unrelenting violence. It focuses on the appendix "The Principles of Newspeak," which describes the novel's invented language whose purpose is to make "heretical thought"—that is, any thought not consistent with the ideology of the totalitarian government—"literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words" (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 198).[2] In that respect, it shifts our perspective on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by treating it as a translation manual with a novel appended. "The Principles of Newspeak" is about how to replace words strategically—that is, how to translate—to reduce the range of things people can think. The novel illustrates the ends to which such translation can be put, especially when its practitioners also have the means to surveil and torture those who think wrongly. It serves as a warning about the logic of cultural translation, whose utopian potential is always held in check by a "fearful asymmetry"[3] that comes about when people with power seek to impose their will on others.

This chapter proceeds in the same way as the last. It starts by describing who Orwell was and how people have tended to read his work. Then it shifts perspective to bring about a parallax view. After it misreads *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it shifts once more. All is not lost, and in the places where the novel goes beyond its appendix, we come to see that the power of surveillance and violence is not as absolute as it appears.

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[2] All page numbers in this chapter's in-text citations come from the critical edition edited by Irving Howe, *Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four: Text, Sources, Criticism*. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is in the public domain in some jurisdictions, including Canada, where the full text is available on the website of the Gutenberg project, http://gutenberg.ca/.

[3] Longinovic, "Fearful Asymmetries: A Manifesto of Cultural Translation," p. 6.

George Orwell and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

George Orwell was the pen-name of Eric Blair, who was born in 1903 and died in 1950. He was a prolific essayist and novelist and a harsh critic of totalitarianism and socialism, especially as it was being institutionalized in Europe after the Second World War. As a writer, he was known for his straightforward style and avoidance of "dying metaphors," "pretentious diction," and "meaningless words," as he explained in his essay "Politics and the English Language."[4]

Orwell is best known for his novels *Animal Farm*, a parable about animals who overthrow their human masters only to become human themselves, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, about everyman Winston Smith and his struggles against a state ruled by the Party and led by a figurehead called Big Brother. It was published in 1949, as "British capitalism was indeed merging with socialism under the guidance of Fabian social planners, and was doing so as welfarism."[5] It introduced an enduring set of ideas about language and government, such as the Thought Police and doublethink ("to hold simultaneously two opinions which canceled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing both of them" [p. 25]).

The story *Nineteen Eighty-Four* tells is part romance, part thriller, part morality tale. Winston Smith lives in the oppressive super-state of Oceania, one of three that control virtually the whole world. The other two are Eurasia and Eastasia. Oceania includes most of the English-speaking world along with South America, while Eurasia includes Europe and the northern parts of the former Soviet Union, and Eastasia includes the southern parts of the Soviet Union along with China, India, and Pakistan. They are in a perpetual state of war, although alliances often shift. The war is unwinnable, and its real purpose, as Winston learns, is to provide

[4] Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," p. 251–252.
[5] During, "More Orwell."

social stability and structure by creating clear categories of *us* and *them*.

Oceania is ruled by the Party. Its elite members—the Inner Party—make up about 2 percent of the population. Its non-elite members—the Outer Party—make up about 13 percent. Non-members—the Proles—make up the remaining 85 percent. The Party administers the government through four ministries. The Ministry of Truth produces the lies that allow the Party to maintain its power. (It also produces the saccharine pop songs and tawdry books that pacify the Proles.) The Ministry of Peace runs Oceania's endless war, first with Eurasia, later with Eastasia. The Ministry of Plenty oversees rationing. Finally, the Ministry of Love tortures anyone who resists the will of the Party.

Winston rebels against the Party with his lover Julia. They are both Outer Party members, and they ally themselves with O'Brien, an Inner Party member who claims to be part of the Brotherhood, a resistance movement ostensibly led by a disgraced Party leader. But in fact O'Brien is loyal to the Party. His invitation to Winston and Julia is a trap. Winston and Julia never know if the Brotherhood really exists, or whether it was just a rumor O'Brien used to lure them in. When Winston is incarcerated in the Ministry of Love, O'Brien is his torturer, and he causes Winston to betray his love for Julia. The book ends with Winston sitting in a café, shedding tears of joy because he has finally overcome his resistance to the Party. Just as an assassin's bullet—which O'Brien promised him would come—enters his brain, "Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother" (p. 197). In that respect, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is like Orwell's other novels that end with their "alienated

heroes losing their individuality and being reconciled to the social order."[6]

Interpretations of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

How have readers interpreted *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? The story is rich enough for many to find in it warnings about their own political circumstances. It is not hard, for instance, to find examples of doublethink in the words of the politicians one opposes. Many saw doublethink in the assertion made by Kellyanne Conway, an adviser to U.S. President Donald Trump, that Press Secretary Sean Spicer "gave alternative facts" when he claimed (falsely) that in 2016 Trump had attracted the "largest audience ever to witness [a presidential] inauguration." It was because readers saw something of their own "post-truth world" in the book that it became a surprise best-seller after Trump's inauguration in 2017.[7]

The same was true of the book when it first appeared. Early reviewers debated whether it was satire, in the same vein as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, a way to talk about the contemporary world that surrounded them. Some saw in its descriptions of London the wartime city they themselves had known only a few years before.[8] Reviewers who found themselves on the side of the political spectrum Orwell opposed saw something else altogether: rather than a critique of totalitarianism, they saw a defense of capitalism, leading one Communist reviewer to say the book "coincide[d] perfectly with the propaganda of the National Association of Manufacturers."[9]

In the first decade or two after *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published, a wide range of

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[6] During, "More Orwell."
[7] Kakutani, "Why '1984' Is a 2017 Must-Read."
[8] See, for instance, the reviews collected in Howe, *Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four: Text, Sources, Criticism*, p. 291–297.
[9] Sillen, "Maggot-of-the-Month," p. 299.

critics engaged with Orwell and his work. According to Simon During, "Lionel Trilling, Q.D. Leavis, Richard Hoggart, Richard Rorty, and even (with reservations) the young Raymond Williams, praised him." But Orwell has been "neglected," During writes, since the 1970s.[10] The aspects of his work that have continued to attract interest relate to language and good writing. Composition and rhetoric scholars, not to mention scholars of political communication, have focused in particular on the idea of "doublespeak," an invented word made by combining two other invented words, *Newspeak* and *doublethink*, which they use to mean

> language which makes the bad seem good, something negative appear positive, something unpleasant appear attractive, or at least tolerable. It is language which avoids or shifts responsibility; language which is at variance with its real and purposed meaning; language which conceals or prevents thought.[11]

Others note that Orwell's philosophy of language, as described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and "Politics and the English Language," is divided between a laudable search for plain-spoken clarity and a nostalgia for the past, "a conservatism that sometimes comes close to sentimentality."[12] It's not clear, as the sections that follow make clear, whether the clarity Orwell sought ever existed or could exist, even within the bounds he himself tries to establish.

"The Principles of Newspeak" as translation manual

If this is how people have interpreted *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, how do we generate a parallax view to see the same book from a new angle, one that places its parts in a different relation to each

[10] During, "More Orwell."
[11] Lutz, "Notes Toward a Definition of Doublespeak," p. 4. The rest of the book from which Lutz's essay comes explores similar themes. See Lutz, *Beyond Nineteen Eighty-Four: Doublespeak in a Post-Orwellian Age*. Note that the word doublespeak does not appear in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
[12] Gibson, "Truisms Are True," p. 13.

other? We focus on the appendix, "The Principles of Newspeak," rather than the novel itself. It's tacked onto the end of the novel, which mentions it only in passing with a note early in the first chapter that says, "Newspeak was the official language of Oceania. For an account of its structure and etymology, see Appendix" (p. 5). It seems peripheral in that the story the novel tells is complete without it. But readers familiar with translation studies, if they look closely, will see in the appendix a description of different modes of translation, much like more conventional works of scholarship.[13] If we focus our attention there, the story becomes an illustration of a philosophy of translation put into practice.[14]

Newspeak, as the appendix explains, "was the official language of Oceania and had been devised to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc, or English Socialism," and its purpose was "not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible" (p. 198). It had identifiable means, goals, and effects. It functioned by substituting one word for many (means) as a way to restrict thought (goals) and cut people off from old ways of speaking and thinking (effects). The Party even employed a cadre of translators "engaged in producing garbled versions—definitive texts, they were called—of poems [and other texts] which had become ideologically offensive but which for one reason or another were to be retained in the anthologies" (p. 29–30). Thus to see the appendix as a translation manual is not terribly farfetched.

The words devised for Newspeak (and thus the translation tools available to members of

[13] For instance, Berman, "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign."
[14] Some of the few people to start with "The Principles of Newspeak" as a lens through which to interpret *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are the writers and producers of a 2017 stage adaptation. They observe that the appendix is "a really radical gesture against the rest of the book. It's a book about how you can't trust the written word." Quoted in Shuessler, "With '1984' on Broadway, Thoughtcrime Hits the Big Time."

the Party) were divided into three categories or vocabularies. The first, the A vocabulary, consisted of "the words needed for the business of everyday life," generally those "involving concrete objects or physical actions" related to eating, working, getting around, and so on (p. 199). The second, the B vocabulary, consisted of compound words "which had been deliberately constructed for political purposes" (p. 200). This category included the words most closely associated with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, such as *Newspeak*, *doublethink*, *thoughtcrime*, and so on. Finally, the C vocabulary included "scientific and technical terms" (p. 203), although not in the sense we might recognize today. Like the words in the B vocabulary, they were ideological: they "were constructed from the same roots [as the scientific terms we know now], but the usual care was taken to define them rigidly and strip them of undesirable meanings" (p. 203). Technicians had access to the words they needed to do their work, but they had little knowledge of other branches of what we would recognize as science. In fact, science as a form of inquiry into the external world was simply inconceivable: "There was, indeed, no word for 'Science,' any meaning that it could possible bear being already sufficiently covered by the word *Ingsoc*" (p. 203).

As one of the architects of the language (a character named Syme) explains to Winston, his job was not to create words but to destroy them:

> It's a beautiful thing, the destruction of words. Of course the great wastage is in the verbs and adjectives, but there are hundreds of nouns that can be got rid of as well. It isn't only the synonyms; there are also the antonyms. After all, what justification is there for a word which is simply the opposite of some other word? A word contains its opposite in itself. Take "good," for instance. If you have a

> word like "good," what need is there for a word like "bad"? "Ungood" will do just as well—better, because it's an exact opposite, which the other is not. Or again, if you want a stronger version of "good," what sense is there in having a whole string of vague useless words like "excellent" and "splendid" and all the rest of them? "Plusgood" covers the meaning, or "doubleplusgood" if you want something stronger still. (p. 35–36)

The appendix spells out this logic even more explicitly (p. 199–200). To negate a word, a speaker added the prefix *un-*. To emphasize it, a speaker added *plus-* or, for still more emphasis, *doubleplus-*. Speakers could combine prefixes (making *doubleplusun-* a very emphatic negation), as well as add suffixes such as *-wise*, to turn words into adverbs, and *-ful*, to turn them into adjectives. Nouns could also be used as verbs. Combined with the restriction of meanings to ideologically correct ideas, this logic made it possible to substitute one word for many. *Goodthink* (meaning "orthodox," "orthodoxy," "thinking in an orthodox way," etc.) and its derivatives (*ungoodthink*, etc.), could take the place of the class of words related to emotions, which were politically dangerous insofar as they were unruly and hard to control (p. 200–203).

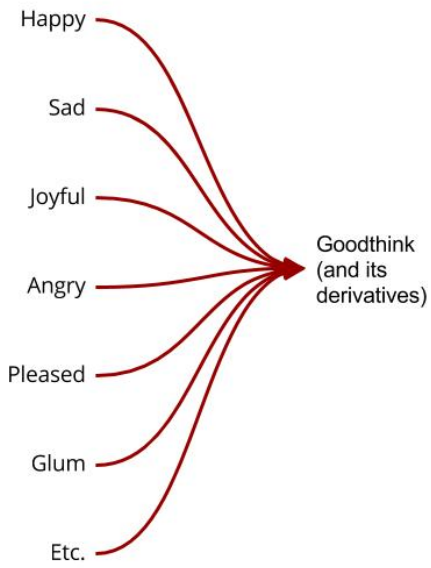

Figure 2.1. Translation of emotion words into variations of *goodthink*

The goals and effects of translation into Newspeak

The goal of Newspeak was to make ideas unthinkable by depriving people of the words they needed to think them. Newspeak's architects (as dreamt up by Orwell) observed that without language, people would experience the world around them as a meaningless flux, a jumble of impressions and sensations. Language imposed order by imposing meaning. Words carved the world up into discrete units.

Anyone who has learned a second language will grasp this idea intuitively: sometimes there's a word in your new language that simply doesn't translate back into your old. The units carved out by your new language are too different. An internet search for "words that don't translate to English," for instance, yields lists that tell you things like *dépaysement* is French for

"the disorientation felt in a foreign country or culture, the sense of being a fish out of water."[15]

The linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf formalized this hypothesis in the 1920s and 30s. Sapir, for instance, wrote,

> It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.[16]

Whorf went still further: "Language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade."[17]

If we take this assertion as a strong hypothesis, the implications are clear: to control how people think, cut them off from their accustomed ways of speaking. (We can also take the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in a weak form, too, where we identify exceptions and counterexamples. We will return to the weak form later in this chapter.) The architects of Newspeak wanted to make speaking a reflex, like when a doctor taps your knee and your leg jerks forward: "Ultimately," Orwell writes, "it was hoped to make articulate speech issue from the larynx without involving the higher brain centers at all. This aim was frankly admitted in the Newspeak word *duckspeak*, meaning 'to quack like a duck'" (p. 203).

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[15] Dalton, "14 Perfect French Words and Phrases We Need in English."
[16] Sapir, "The Status of Linguistics as a Science," p. 209.
[17] Quoted in Lutz, "Notes toward a Definition of Doublespeak," p. 2.

In short, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Newspeak is effective because it cuts people off from their history and deprives them of their ability to make sense of the world themselves. Think back to the discussion of interpretants in chapter 1. People hear a word, and it makes them think of an idea, which reminds them of another, which reminds them of still another, and so on. Newspeak cuts people off from those interpretants. It substitutes the interpretants the Party wants, or, if somehow speakers achieve the "ideal"—such as it is—of duckspeak, it eliminates interpretants altogether.

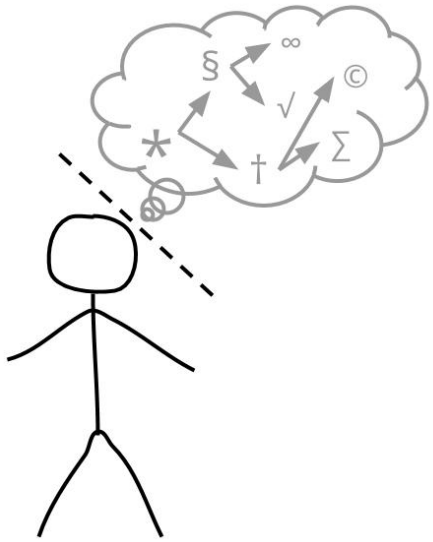

Figure 2.2. Newspeak cuts someone off from a sign's interpretants

In other words, Newspeak, along with the violence inflicted on people who rebel, helps create the conditions for a form of collective solipsism. If people can't trust their interpretations of the world or their recollection of history (on which they might base interpretations of the world), then the Party can interpret the world for them. O'Brien makes this state of affairs clear

in a long exchange with Winston as he tortures him. Winston says that the world is older than the Party, and O'Brien tells him to prove it. Winston can't because he has no independently verifiable evidence. O'Brien (not to mention the Party he represents) claims that whatever Winston remembers, he remembers it wrong. Even if he had physical evidence, O'Brien would claim it was phony, a claim Winston could not refute. (If he tried to refute it, what evidence would he have?) As O'Brien says,

> We control matter because we control the mind. Reality is inside the skull. You will learn by degrees, Winston. There is nothing that we could not do. Invisibility, levitation—anything. I could float off this floor like a soap bubble if I wished to. I do not wish to, because the Party does not wish it. (p. 176)

Through torture, O'Brien deprives Winston of any grounds on which he might stake a contradictory claim, just as the Party, though its institutionalized violence and surveillance, does to the people of Oceania. Through Newspeak, the Party deprives them of the very tools they would need to imagine that there might be a different way to know the world. Violence and language work together as complementary means of control.

Solipsism

At this point, it would appear that cultural translation can be short-circuited. Its potential comes from the gap between what one person says and another person hears and understands, a gap brought about by the play of interpretants. If language and violence can cut people off from those interpretants, the potential for change will go unrealized.

In other words, we're 180 degrees away from where we were at the end of chapter 1. To

find our path back, it is necessary to look more closely at the philosophy (or more precisely, the epistemological stance) of solipsism, whose name derives from the Latin words *solus*, meaning "alone," and *ipse*, meaning "self." As O'Brien tortures Winston, Winston wants to object to the "belief that nothing exists outside your own mind" (p. 177). He searches for the name of this idea, which O'Brien gives him: "The word you are trying to think of is solipsism. But you are mistaken. This is not solipsism. Collective solipsism, if you like. But that is a different thing; in fact, the opposite thing" (p. 177).

What exactly is this idea? Think of the movie *The Matrix*.[18] In the beginning, the hero, a computer programmer named Neo, is living a normal life, although he is puzzled by things that keep repeating themselves. He is contacted by a man named Morpheus, who offers him a choice. If Neo wants to understand the anomalies, he can swallow a red pill, although Morpheus warns him that if he does, he will face consequences he cannot yet grasp. If he wants to avoid those consequences, he can take a blue pill and return to his life. Neo takes the red pill, of course. (If he didn't, there'd be no plot.) He is then dragged violently out of his world, and he awakes to find himself in a womb-like pod with electrodes plugged into his brain. Everything he has experienced up to that point was in the matrix, a computer-generated world that felt real because his mind treated it as real. Now he is in a much harsher world, which gives him the perspective to see that the matrix simply provided him with a powerful illusion.

The matrix was a solipsistic world, existing (for him) only in his mind. Or to return to our

[18] Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix*. The conceit that makes *The Matrix* work, namely that computers can create worlds that seem self-sufficient to the people inside them, is common in popular culture, revealing a range of different ways to think about solipsism. Fans of the 1990s program *Star Trek: The Next Generation* will recognize it in the episode "Ship in a Bottle," where a self-aware holographic "person" believes he exits the holodeck when really his consciousness is uploaded to yet another program. Fans of the more recent series *Black Mirror* will recognize it in a number of episodes, including "San Junipero," where the hero uploads her consciousness to a computer-generated island paradise.

previous examples, it's as if Hero 2, who argued with Hero 1 in chapter 1, suddenly discovered that the entire exchange wasn't real.

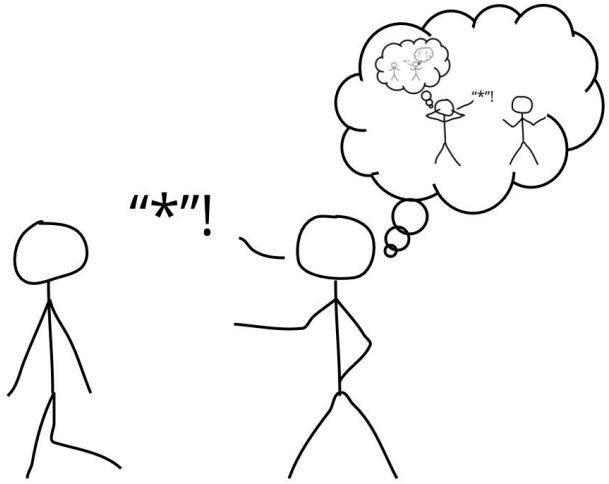

Figure 2.3. Hero 1 and Hero 2 argue, or so Hero 2 believes

It's as if he imagined the entire exchange, or perhaps someone made him imagine it through some combination of language (where the meanings of words were restricted) and violence.

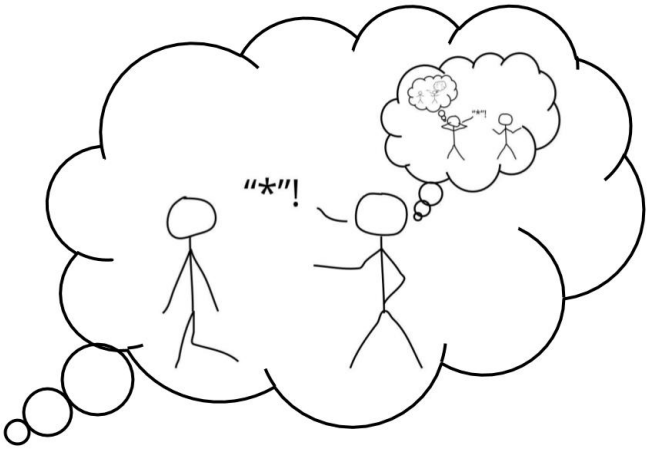

Figure 2.4. Hero 2 discovers that none of their argument was real

Consider the doubt this would instill in Hero 2, who could no longer trust his own memory. He would be all the more pliable to coercion, to the degree that he could even hold onto his sanity. Losing the ability to trust his own senses would cut him off from the world outside of himself.

It is this second scenario, that of being made to imagine, that O'Brien has in mind when he says collective solipsism is not the same thing as solipsism. Collective solipsism is imposed from the outside, and it's more insidious because it causes people to doubt their senses and memory. So how does the Party implement its strategies on a large scale? How does it create and control a *collective* form of solipsism? It uses techniques such as gaslighting, or "psychologically manipulat[ing] a person into questioning their own sanity,"[19] often by telling them that something they remember is not true. The Party has an entire apparatus to do just that, including the Ministry of Truth, where Winston works, which is devoted to changing "historical" records to match the narrative of the day. The people of Oceania trust the narrative they are given more than their own memories or perceptions, to the point where it comes to replace their memories. Early in the book, for instance, Winston hears that chocolate rations are being reduced from thirty grams to twenty. He is called upon as part of his job to rewrite documents that showed that the ration had ever been thirty grams. The rewriting is so successful that a day later he hears that

> there had even been demonstrations to thank Big Brother for raising the chocolate ration to twenty grams a week. And only yesterday, he reflected, it had been

[19] American Dialect Society, quoted in Yagoda, "How Old Is 'Gaslighting'?" The term comes from a film called *Gaslight* released in 1944, which was based on a play produced in 1938. It is about a man who tries to undermine his wife's confidence in her own perception by insisting that the gaslights in their house do not flicker, even though they do.

> announced that the ration was to be *reduced* to twenty grams a week. Was it possible that they could swallow that, after only twenty-four hours? Yes, they swallowed it. (p. 40)

More dramatically, at a climactic point in the story, Oceania's war with Eurasia—its enemy up to that point—becomes an alliance, and its alliance with Eastasia turns into a war. Everyone is gathered for the public execution of Eurasian prisoners when, "at just this moment it had been announced that Oceania was not after all at war with Eurasia. Oceania was at war with Eastasia. Eurasia was an ally" (p. 120). This statement contradicts everything people see around them. All the propaganda says the Eurasia was the enemy, but the Party's gaslighting is so efficient that the only possible response is the idea that they have been tricked: "The banners and posters with which the square was decorated were all wrong! Quite half of them had the wrong faces on them. It was sabotage! The agents of Goldstein [a traitor to the Party and ostensible leader of the Brotherhood resistance movement] had been at work!" (p. 120).

In short, the Ministry of Truth treats history as a palimpsest, or a document (such as a medieval scroll) whose text is scraped off so the page can be used again. It constantly erases and rewrites the historical record, which has already been erased and rewritten often enough that the word *historical* is nonsensical. The record bears no relation to events that have actually happened, but in the Party's gaslit collective solipsism, those events don't matter. In fact, those events don't exist. The only ones that matter are those that matter to the Party: "In no case would it have been possible, once the deed [of fabricating the historical record] was done, to prove that any falsification had taken place" (p. 28).

Where does all of this—Newspeak, torture, solipsism, gaslighting, and the palimpsest of

history—leave the question of translation? "The Principles of Newspeak" ends by quoting the first lines of the U.S. Declaration of Independence ("We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"). Then it explains,

> It would have been quite impossible to render this into Newspeak while keeping to the sense of the original. The nearest one could come to doing so would be to swallow the whole passage up in the single word *crimethink*. A full translation could only be an ideological translation, whereby [Thomas] Jefferson's words would be changed into a panegyric on absolute government. (p. 205).

In other words, translation from Oldspeak (English as we speak it now) into Newspeak brings about a complete transformation of sense and reveals the limits of substituting one set of words for another when the words come from languages characterized by disjunctive worldviews.

The lived contradictions of Newspeak

This is the point where Orwell's explicit reflection on language stops but where the novel itself goes further. It provides certain clues about Newspeak in actual use, which is far more complicated than the appendix might lead us to believe. Linguistic reduction might work hand-in-hand with historical amnesia, but its effectiveness is not absolute. Orwell offers an important caveat: Newspeak would render "heretical thought" unthinkable only "so far as thought is dependent on words" (p. 198). This caveat hints at the fact that, in some instances, thought is *not* dependent on words. Here is where we revisit the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in a weak form, one that allows for the possibility of thought outside of language: although language

does impose a way to interpret the world, it is not ironclad. The example I gave of a word with no equivalent in English—*dépaysement*—helps us understand the room we have to maneuver. I used English—despite its lack of a word!—to explain the concept in ways that helped you understand it. If a strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis held true, we would not be able to think outside the structure imposed by our language at all.

So how do we do it? In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, characters think outside the structures of Newspeak in at least three ways. First, they engage in doublethink (the ability to treat two contradictory thoughts as true at the same time). Second, and more interestingly, they react to nonverbal signs, such as smells or sounds in nature. Finally, they encounter complex signs (those that are more than simple words) multiple times, and the signs evoke different things each time. In other words, characters are reflexive about their own thoughts. They are not as cut off from their history as the book would lead us to believe.

Doublethink

Throughout *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell repeats the same cryptic trio of aphorisms:

WAR IS PEACE

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

At first glance, these translations (which is what they are, as *peace* replaces *war*, *slavery* replaces *freedom*, and *strength* replaces *ignorance*) seem nonsensical. How could war be its opposite? Or freedom or ignorance? What they reveal, in fact, is that Newspeak is grounded in a contradiction, that of doublethink, or the act of knowing and forgetting at the same time (but also forgetting

what you needed to forget, and then forgetting the act of forgetting). "Even to understand the word 'doublethink' involved the use of doublethink" because people had to forget they were doing it (p. 25). This act is the contradiction that makes Newspeak possible: doublethink involves having thoughts that Newspeak would stamp out, but without doublethink, Newspeak could not exist.

What makes the aphorisms examples of doublethink? War is peace because Oceania's perpetual state of war with its neighbors allows the Party to maintain order, if not peace, within its borders. Freedom is slavery because, as O'Brien explains, "power is collective. The individual only has power in so far as he ceases to be an individual" (p. 175), which is to say, in so far as he submits himself to slavery. Ignorance is strength because the Party remains strong so long as its individual members are kept in a state of ignorant servitude.[20] In a feat of acrobatic dialectical thinking, people have to forget that war is war, freedom is freedom, and ignorance is ignorance. But the negated term in the dialectic remains in latent form. If it disappeared completely, there would be no need for either the Ministry of Truth (which labors to impose the Party's ideological apparatus) or the the Ministry of Love (which serves as its repressive apparatus).

Nonverbal signs

Other signs reveal something different about the caveat about language. They are nonverbal—sounds, sights, smells, or other sensations that evoke something for characters, even if the characters struggle to name what it is. The taste of real chocolate, rather than the

[20] Much of this philosophy is laid out in *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, a book-within-a-book signed by Emmanuel Goldstein, the figurehead of the Brotherhood resistance movement. (O'Brien reveals when he tortures Winston that he is actually the author.) See p. 122–133.

"dull-brown crumbly stuff that tasted ... like the smoke of a rubbish fire," stirs up for Winston "some memory which he could not pin down, but which was powerful and troubling" (p. 81). Later, when he is awaiting his torturers, hunger evokes visceral notions of pain or panic, depending on how intensely he experiences it (p. 152).

What makes these signs dangerous to the Party is the their unruliness: the interpretants they evoke are visceral, and language is inadequate to describe them. They risk escaping the Party's control. Consider when Winston and Julia first meet, beyond the reach of the Party's surveillance (or so they believe). They are in a field with bushes and trees, and they hear a thrush who seems to sing for the pure joy of it: "The music went on and on, minute after minute, with astonishing variations, never once repeating itself, almost as though the bird were deliberately showing off its virtuosity" (p. 82). Winston gives himself over to the performance: "by degrees the flood of music drove all speculations out of his mind. It was as though it were a kind of liquid stuff that poured all over him and got mixed up with the sunlight that filtered through the leaves. He stopped thinking and merely felt" (p. 82). Later, the last time he and Julia are together before the Thought Police move in to arrest them, they revisit the scene:

> "Do you remember," he said, "the thrush that sang to us, that first day, at the edge of the wood?"
>
> "He wasn't singing to us," said Julia. "He was singing to please himself. Not even that. He was just singing."
>
> The birds sang, the proles sang, the Party did not sing ... [E]verywhere stood the same solid unconquerable figure [a Prole woman Winston has seen before], made monstrous by work and childbearing, toiling from birth to death

> and still singing. Out of those mighty loins a race of conscious beings must one day come. You were the dead; theirs was the future. But you could share in that future if you kept alive the mind as they kept alive the body, and passed on the secret doctrine that two plus two make four. (p. 147)

Julia insists the bird's song was without meaning. Winston finds meaning there nonetheless: it reminds him of the Prole woman he has heard singing, and the singing itself signifies something like freedom.

Hence the fear the Party has of these signs, which is apparent in its attempts to stamp them out. "The terrible thing that the Party had done was to persuade you that mere impulses, mere feelings, were of no account, while at the same time robbing you of all power over the material world" (p. 110). The Party can never take this persuasion for granted. It constantly has to resort to brute force to try to overcome the power of these signs. The amount of force it uses is in direct proportion to the power of these signs.

Signs that evoke history

A third set of signs reveals in yet another way the limits of the Party's control over thought. In contrast to the nonverbal signs, which tended toward the simple and unmediated, these signs are complex. They share an important trait: Winston encounters them twice over the course of the book, and their meaning changes because of the repetition.

What makes these examples interesting is that it is O'Brien (and through him, the Party) who exploits the semiotic gap between one use and the next. He presents them to Winston as a way to bring him into the Party's solipsistic world. The first time Winston encounters each of

these signs, they evoke ideas of freedom; the second time, frustration and hopelessness, as O'Brien turns the idea of freedom against itself. In the first example, Winston is at the Ministry of Truth when he comes across half a page of newsprint with a photo of men named Jones, Aaronson, and Rutherford. The Party's official history records them as traitors. They confessed to their crimes and were executed. But the photo makes it clear that they were somewhere else when their supposed crimes took place. It is historical evidence that proves they were forced to lie. Such evidence, Winston realizes, is "enough to blow the Party to atoms" (p. 53).

Later, Winston sees the photo again. O'Brien shows it to him briefly and then withdraws it from his sight.

> "It exists!" [Winston] cried.
>
> "No," said O'Brien.
>
> He stepped across the room. There was a memory hole [where people put paper to be incinerated] in the opposite wall. O'Brien lifted the grating. Unseen, the frail slip of paper was whirling away on the current of warm air; it was vanishing in a flash of flame. O'Brien turned away from the wall.
>
> "Ashes," he said. "Not even identifiable ashes. Dust. It does not exist. It never existed."
>
> "But it did exist! It does exist! It exists in memory. I remember it. You remember it."
>
> "I do not remember it," said O'Brien. (p. 164)

Winston recognizes O'Brien's reaction as doublethink. The photo that once meant hope now meant "deadly helplessness" (p. 164).

The second sign is an entire conversation Winston and Julia have with O'Brien when he has tricked them into believing he belongs to the resistance. O'Brien tells them they will receive orders they do not understand, and he wants to know what they are willing to do. Will they commit "murder" or "acts of sabotage which may cause the death of hundreds of innocent people"? Will they "betray [their] country to foreign powers"? Will they be willing "to cheat, to forge, to blackmail, to corrupt the minds of children, to distribute habit-forming drugs, to encourage prostitution, to disseminate venereal diseases," or even "to throw sulphuric acid in a child's face" if it would help weaken the Party? (p. 114–115) Yes, they answer. Their assent, as they see it and as O'Brien explains it, evokes a hope without hope, the idea that the future will be better, even if they will not know it. "There is no possibility that any perceptible change will happen within our own lifetime," O'Brien says. "We are the dead.[21] Our only true life is in the future" (p. 117). Later, when O'Brien is torturing Winston, he plays a recording of this conversation: right after Winston accuses the Party of cruelty, O'Brien makes him listen to the terrible things he said he would do. A conversation that evoked notions of sacrifice in the name of freedom now evokes duplicity and moral depravity.

What do we learn from this example? The conversation itself does not change. Its second iteration is a recording, after all. O'Brien uses the repetition to attribute new meaning to it and break Winston's will. But there is something nonetheless redeeming about these examples, for they demonstrate that even the Party cannot change the fact that to use a sign is to transform it, and through that transformation, to translate it.

[21] This is the same phrase—"We are the dead"—that Winston uses when he thinks about how the Proles (whom he has seen singing) might overcome the Party. Right before the Thought Police raid their room, Winston and Julia repeat the phrase again. It loses its messianic overtones and becomes quite literal when the Thought Police confirm in response, "You are the dead" (p. 147).

Conclusion: Cultural translation between utopia and dystopia

Chapter 1 presented a utopian vision of cultural translation: we can exploit the gap between signs to open up space for people who have been socially or politically excluded. This chapter presents the other side of the coin: we can also exploit this gap to close off space and impose our will upon others through real and symbolic violence.

In this respect, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, although fiction, provides a valuable lesson for the world we walk through every day. What should we make of the fact that people can see in it their current political situation? If anything, the book and the tension it illustrates (between things that can be controlled through violence and things that can't) help clarify the relationship between hope and work. Cultural translation has the potential to bring more openness to the world, but we must not let optimism overcome us. Similarly, cultural translation has the potential to allow for cruelty and injustice, but we must not let pessimism overcome us, either. Whatever effect is to be achieved, we must work to achieve it. We must actively engage with each other and with the systems of power that structure our relationships.

Hence the need for tactics. Hence the question that grounds the next chapter: what tools do we have at our disposal to allow us to engage meaningfully with people with whom we do not see eye-to-eye?

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