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History and translation. The event of language

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

*Published Version:*

History and translation. The event of language / Rundle, Christopher; Rafael, Vicente. - STAMPA. - 126:(2016), pp. 23-48. [10.1075/btl.126.02run]

*Availability:*

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/560962> since: 2021-03-12

*Published:*

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1075/btl.126.02run>

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Rundle, Christopher & Vicente Rafael (2016) "History and translation. The event of language". In *Border Crossings. Translation Studies and other disciplines*, edited by Yves Gambier and Luc van Doorslaer. [Benjamins Translation Library No. 126]: 23-48. DOI: 10.1075/btl.126.02run. ©This post-print copy is shared under Creative Commons license: Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0).

## History and translation

### The event of language

Christopher Rundle and Vicente Rafael  
University of Bologna / University of Washington

The purpose of this conversation is to reflect on the inter/trans-disciplinary potential of translation as an object of historical research. This dialogue will be based on our respective experience in doing historical research on translation; in the case of Rundle from within Translation Studies and in the case of Rafael from within History. These divisions between disciplinary fields are necessarily foregrounded, given that the purpose of this collection is to focus on trans-disciplinarity; they are divisions that can stem from the actual department scholars belong to, from the research and discourse that informs their research, and from the academic community that they choose to address in their publications.

**Keywords:** translation as historical object, history through translation, translation and power, the politics of language, interdisciplinarity

The purpose of this conversation is to reflect on the inter/trans-disciplinary potential of translation as an object of historical research. This dialogue will be based on our respective experience in doing historical research on translation; in the case of Rundle from within Translation Studies and in the case of Rafael from within History. These divisions between disciplinary fields are necessarily foregrounded in what follows, given that the purpose of this collection is to focus on trans-disciplinarity; they are divisions that can stem from the actual department scholars belong to, from the research and discourse that informs their research and from the academic community that they choose to address in their publications.

In order for the exchange that follows to be clear to readers who are not familiar with our work, we will begin with a short research profile for each. This background information should also help to make the more biographical elements of this dialogue intelligible.

#### Christopher Rundle

My academic background is in translation studies and I did my PhD in Translation Studies. I have been a member of the Department of Interpreting and Translation Studies of the University of Bologna for over 10 years. I am also honorary fellow at the Centre for Translation and Intercultural Studies (CTIS) of the University of Manchester.

I have been taking an interest in translation history for over 15 years. My research in this field has always focused on translation under fascism – in particular in Fascist Italy. I have

published a number of articles based on this research as well as a monograph, *Publishing Translations in Fascist Italy* (2010). I have also co-edited, with Kate Sturge, a volume on *Translation Under Fascism* (2010), which brings together research by different scholars on Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, Francoist Spain, and Salazar's Portugal. More recently I have begun to reflect on some of the methodological issues I have encountered during these years of historical research, and in line with this more theoretical interest I have published some articles (Rundle 2011; 2012) and recently edited a Special Issue of *The Translator* on "Theories and Methodologies of Translation History" (2014).

## **Vicente Rafael**

I was born and raised in Manila, Philippines and attended Cornell University where I obtained a PhD in History and Southeast Asian Studies. For the last decade, I've been Professor of History at the University of Washington in Seattle. Previously, I taught at the University of California in San Diego and at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa and have had visiting fellowships at Stanford University, the University of California at Irvine, and the East-West Center in Honolulu.

My work has long focused on the historical relationship between language and power in imperial, national and post-colonial settings, primarily in the Philippines under Spanish, American and Republican regimes, as well as in post-9/11 United States. These concerns are reflected in my books: *Contracting Colonialism* (1988); *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (2000); *The Promise of the Foreign* (2005); and in my forthcoming book, *Motherless Tongues: The Insurgency of Language amid Wars of Translation*. In all cases, translation has provided me with ways to critically engage a range of historical phenomenon: Christian conversion, nationalist literature and revolution, popular theater, colonial census, war photography, digital technology, street slang, overseas workers, authoritarian politics, the "global wars on terror", among others.

### **1. The role of translation in historical studies**

Vicente Rafael responds to questions (*in italics*) posed by Christopher Rundle.

#### **1.1 The role of translation**

*As a historian you are unusual in that translation plays a central role both in your research but also as a key concept in your thinking.*

I didn't start out doing Translation Studies. Rather, I stumbled upon the topic when I was doing research for my dissertation on the Spanish colonization of the Philippines. I was very interested then, as I still am, in doing something like a history from below.

Nearly all of the scholarship on Spanish colonization, especially in the early modern period, was written using Spanish language sources, most especially missionary accounts.

There was a tendency to privilege the interpretation of events from the perspective of those who wrote the records. For this reason, early colonial history tended to deal mostly with the actions of the colonizers. A great deal concerned the Spanish clergy: the work of evangelisation, the hardships involved in living among the native peoples, the struggles with abusive colonial officials, and so on. Or they focused on the actions of the colonial State: the comings and goings of various governor-generals, the wars against the Dutch, the British, or against the Muslim peoples, policies around the sale of offices, tax collections, conflicts with the clergy, attempts to put down native revolts and contain the rising numbers of Chinese traders, and the like. There was nothing about colonial history from the native perspective.

Part of the problem is that there were no native accounts that paralleled those of the Spanish. However, when I began to look at the sources, one thing jumped out at me, something that nearly everyone who works in this area has observed but no one had taken seriously: the importance of translation in the project of religious conversion. Rather than force the natives to learn Spanish and Latin—a practical impossibility given the very small number of Spaniards that were in this most distant colony—the missionaries, following the practice of evangelizing among native peoples in the Americas, sought to learn local languages. They reconstructed native idioms and wrote grammars and dictionaries to enable them to preach and administer the sacraments, especially to hear confession, in the vernacular languages. And if you consider how conversion was crucial to the Spanish project of conquest and colonization, then it's not hard to see how translation provided the communicative infrastructure, as it were, for establishing colonial hegemony. Simply put: without translation, no conversion; and without conversion, no colonization.

From there, it seemed natural enough to pursue the question of translation as a key to understanding early colonial history. Translation was the point of contact between missionaries and native converts, just as it was the point whereby men's words were transformed into carriers of the Word of God. There was an entire theology of translation that served to frame the missionary "reduction" of native speech into Christian terms. However, it also became quickly apparent to me that such a project was bound to fail. Confronted with native terms for which there was no direct translation into the Spanish or Latin, missionaries often feared that they would be misunderstood. It was precisely the resistance of native speech to colonial-Christian translation that led me to think that therein lays the possibility of seeing native agency at work. It was not so much in their accounts, as in their language as the repository of their life worlds that one could begin to understand native responses to Christian conversion and by extension Spanish colonization.

So you see, my interest in translation emerged organically from the particular situation I was looking at. But once I understood how translation figured centrally, albeit often invisibly, in the workings of colonial history not only in the Spanish Philippines, but in many other colonial situations, that led me to reflect more and more on the role of translation in the formation of historical imagination.

I am a historian who is drawn largely to the politics of language and to the technologies of communication—you might say I am primarily interested in the conditions of possibility for mediating the formation of historical subjects. And I don't think you can study these things without looking at processes of mediation. Translation is another name for all these processes of mediation, communication, and linguistic politics. Similarly, whenever interpretation becomes important—and I would say it is always important in the history of social relations—translation is indispensable. From the perspective of histories of the relationship between self and society, or society and the State, translation is this generalized process differentiation—from within as well as across languages and societies, the study of which allows us to get beyond historicist accounts of institutions and 'big men'.

### *1.2 The historical perspective provided by translation*

*The idea that translation helps you in your quest to recount a different history, one that is from the bottom up and "allows us to get beyond historicist accounts of institutions and 'big men'" is fascinating. Can you expand on ways in which translation has not just emerged from your historical subject but has also helped you to view/narrate a certain kind of history; ways in which it has contributed to a different history of the subject to that recounted by those who take no interest in translation?*

I've always been interested in popular practices of translation, and the ways they mimic but also deviate from normative practices. For this reason, I've been interested for example in the emergence of slang and creole languages; in the transformation of vernacular languages of the colonized compelled to accommodate the foreign speech of the colonizer; or the adoption of and adaptation to the linguistic-economic-political pressures of globalization by, say, overseas contract workers, middle class nationalists, entertainment and advertising discourses and local writers. Translation provides a perspective from which to see the kinds of borrowings and thefts that go on between and among different social groups, and thus a way of understanding some of the conditions that accompany some acts of resistance and rebellion in the face of changing power relations.

*You also say above that translation is "always important in the history of social relations". I agree. So why is it that this dimension to the history of social relations is so often ignored by 'historians'?*

This is the big question. My own sense—and here I can only provide a short response—is that historians attuned to problems of consciousness and language, knowledge and their discursive articulations, or the expressive and aesthetic aspects of political experience will be more attuned to the questions of translation. Those who are less so will tend to ignore translation, assuming that language as such is purely instrumental and has little social purchase.

### 1.3 Interaction with Translation Studies

*How would you describe your interaction with Translation Studies?*

I got interested in translation outside of what we now regard as the discipline of 'Translation Studies.' I had never heard of it until about ten years ago. So my theoretical touchstones for thinking about translation were always works in philosophy and anthropology. I was fortunate enough in graduate school in the early 1980s to work with two scholars whose interests were bound up with questions of language, subjectivity and political culture: the anthropologist James T. Siegel and the political scientist Benedict Anderson. They were absolutely formative for my thinking about translation and history. Siegel's work especially on the role of translation in the politics of the New Order dictatorship in Java helped me think about the relations of power that every translative act assembles as well as dis-assembles. Anderson, who is best known for his work on nationalism (see, for example, his classic work, *Imagined Communities*, 1983), had done extensive translations and interpretations of Indonesian and Javanese literature, exploring their relations with indigenous and colonial notions of power. Siegel's and Anderson's ethnographic approaches to translation were very influential for me. I was also lucky to work with Dominick LaCapra who introduced me to both major and minor strains of thought in European intellectual history that included theories of language. Later on, I was told by my editor that my work would be classified as *postcolonial* for marketing purposes—a term that was barely audible when I was a student—and found myself reading as well as being read alongside some of the folks associated with Subaltern Studies, though I am of course not affiliated with them in any formal way.

### 1.4 Audience

*When writing do you have a particular audience in mind? In which academic forum are you ideally positioning yourself? In which discourse are you participating?*

The question of audience is important, but for me it usually comes after the fact of drafting a piece. Usually, I start reading and writing as a response to something that pulls at me, that engages my attention: the *war on terror*, the *messianic* articulation of Philippine politics, the problem of what I've been calling *democratic affect*, and more recently, on the crisis of the humanities in Southeast Asia as it relates to the process of globalization and nationalism. It is only later that I revise the essay to resonate with the particular interest of whatever audience I find myself in: a conference, a seminar or a particular journal. It is rare that I start out writing with a particular journal in mind; rather I write something and figure out what journal might take it. Usually, I end up publishing in more comparative venues and only lately have my pieces appeared in translation studies journals. I rarely publish in history journals mainly because my work is not usually a good fit for their pages; I have always felt that professional historians are much less interested in what I have to write, even if I avidly follow their writings. There is a kind of asymmetry of engagement

between what I write and what 'real historians' write insofar as most historians think of language and translation as incidental and peripheral to their work.

*When presenting your research to non-TS audience do you feel the need to introduce translation as a research object or concept?*

Yes and no. I always hesitate to frame my work as pushing this or that approach or subscribing to this or that theory. I'm more concerned with letting these theoretical concerns, especially around translation, bubble up organically from the host of issues I happen to be talking about. For example, I've written about the US *war on terror* and the strategy of counterinsurgency. Rather than say 'I'm going to talk about counterinsurgency from the perspective of translation', I would rather point to the texts that have been seminal in counterinsurgency theory and point to those moments when the question of hegemony, persuasion, conversion, and interpretation become crucial with regard to military occupiers interacting with local people. From there, you can see how the question of translation becomes inescapable, whether it has to do with employing native interpreters, or developing automatic translation systems, or in tracking modes of resistance among occupied people. You might say I prefer an approach *from below*, working with the materiality of texts and the landscape of documented evidence to show how historical investigation will always be linked to the workings of translation in one form or another.

*When engaging explicitly with TS scholars do you see them as sharing your same discourse? Do you feel the need to adapt your discourse to make it more relevant to a TS audience?*

I think my work figures in some of the things they—and we—do, especially those interested in postcolonial translation. And inasmuch as I am located in a history department, I don't feel as much pressure to adapt to the discourse of TS, especially since I think much of the TS discourse is already derived (in the good sense of that word) from critical theory, deconstruction, anthropological linguistics, literary criticism, etc. So if you know those areas, then there is a greater chance that whatever you say will resonate with TS practitioners.

### *1.5 The impact of Translation Studies on historiography*

*Is it fair to say that most historical research carried out by TS scholars does not filter through into the work/discourse of historians? If so, why in your opinion?*

Historians for the most part aren't trained to take language seriously except either as an obstacle to understanding the *real world* or as means to an end. The agency of the linguistic escapes most of them, or they are simply not interested in attending to it and following through its social ramifications. This contrasts with literary critics or with philosophers and anthropologists who are always engaged with moving between or within languages, finding correspondences, excavating etymologies, attending to semantic indeterminacy and conflicts of interpretations. Those historians who take research to be a hermeneutic progression and think of archival research as part of generalized translation process will obviously be more inclined to take Translation Studies seriously and have things to say

that will be of interest to those working in this field. For the majority of historians I know, this isn't the case. It doesn't make their work any less vital, but it does mean setting limits to their readership and making them less likely to resonate with Translation Studies scholarship.

Very few historians have engaged TS, and so at the moment there is very little attempt among historians to learn about TS. As I mentioned above, what you get instead is an asymmetrical relationship, whereby TS will invariably be interested in historical studies, but historians only occasionally interested in TS.

*My own opinion is that applying typical TS paradigms, such as the foreignizing/domesticating binary, or polysystem theory (to cite two of the most over-used) to translation practice in different historical contexts, has the effect of stripping each context of its historical difference/specificity so as to fit it into pre-determined categories or models; thereby effectively eliminating much of the historical insight therein and merely confirming ideas that we have already formed. I believe that this distortion comes from an excessive focus on translation practice, on the translator, rather than on the role that translation – as a social/historical/literary phenomenon – has played, and rather than on the value of translation as an interpretative lens through which to re-examine a historical object in new and interesting ways.*

I agree with many of your points. There is a danger of reifying or fetishizing certain concepts of TS. I think one uses them when they seem appropriate to the topic at hand; but one should let them go if they end up blocking one's progress. One can and should use TS to shed light on certain historical problems; but it is also important to historicize TS concepts. As I said, the question of translation should emerge organically from one's research rather than something that is imposed from the outset.

#### *1.6 Translation as interpretative key*

*In your essay Welcoming What Comes: Translating Sovereignty in the Revolutionary Philippines (in Rafael, forthcoming) you appear to be exploring the insights you can gain by using translation as a tool to pick apart key concepts related to Filipino history. A philosophical endeavour to understand the underlying metaphors of Filipino notions of freedom. Can you explain how this kind of investigation integrates with more empirical research on translation in history?*

As with much of the work I do on the Philippines (and with the US), I am interested in how certain foreign terms or ideas become localized in order to become legible to those using them. In this essay you mentioned, my main concern was the way local practices of translation, what I call *vernacularization*, produces particular political effects that constitute a local instance in the universal history of freedom, if you will. And that process of particularizing the universal (and questioning the claims of a certain colonizing universality) is pretty hard to track unless you have recourse to the local languages.

### 1.7 *A nation-bound conceptualization of translation*

*In The Promise of the Foreign (Rafael 2005) you talk about the 'spiritual principle' of a nation (p. xv). What is your opinion on the push by many in TS to overcome nation-bound conceptions of translations? Do you think this is a viable, realistic option? Surely without the concept of nations it would be very hard to contextualise any inter-linguistic exchange?*

Yes, as much as we would like to overcome the *spiritual* baggage of nationhood (a term from Renan, in his famous essay (1882) "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?"), I don't think it's a practical possibility. For one thing, nations as Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983) has argued are as much imperial residues as they are linguistic creations. It's hard to imagine a nation that isn't also the result of a certain politics of language, whereby the national language emerges in and through the reorganization, marginalization, and mystification of local vernaculars.

Nationalism as I've argued (and others, too) subsists on a linguistic hierarchy. The nation stands atop a linguistic hierarchy. To speak the national language is thus already to engage in a process of translation as one moves from one's mother tongue to the national tongue. Even if the national language is one's mother tongue, one still has to translate to speak it—a process that Jakobson calls *intra-linguistic translation*. This is because a language becomes nationalized to the extent that it has been transformed and standardized, especially once it is taught in schools and used in newspapers.

That process of standardization essential to nationalising a language is a process of translation. It entails hierarchization (the national language stands above other vernacular possibilities) and education (every citizen is expected to learn to speak and write it correctly in order to be part of the nation). The canonization of literature as 'national' is key to consolidating the affective and imaginative attachment to the national language so that it becomes, in time, a kind of *natural language* over and above existing *native languages*. Indeed, we can readily see how *native* or vernacular languages become so only in relation to the emergence of a national language. So, vernacular languages as *mother tongues* are conceptualized as such only from the perspective of a national language, that is, as a result of a process of translation essential to every project of nation-building. Translation is thus integral to what you might call *bildung* in German. And the nation-state is the crucial agency for bringing about this *bildung*.

### 1.8 *The failure of translation, the persistence of the untranslatable*

*The failure of translation, the persistence of the untranslatable, the treachery and treason inherent in an act of translation, seem to be recurring themes in your work. This is interesting because the usual position adopted within TS has been that it is more fruitful/constructive to focus on what translation achieves rather than on what it doesn't achieve.*

*I found myself wondering about this when reading your analysis of the role of translation in wartime (Rafael 2007; 2009; 2012). Of the role of interpreters working for the US military in Iraq you say:*

Rather than promote understanding and hospitality, the work of translation seems to spawn misgivings and misrecognition. [...] The treachery and treason inherent in translation are the insistent counterpoints to its promise of telecommunication and the just exchange of meaning. In the body of the interpreter, translation reaches its limits. 'Terps,' as the uncanny doubles of U.S. soldiers and Iraqi insurgents, are productive neither of meaning nor of domination, but only the circulation of what remains untranslatable. (2007: 245)

If translation is like war, is there also a way of reversing this association to say that war is like translation? It is possible I think if we consider that the time of war bears some relationship to the movement of translation that leads not to the privileging of meaning but to emergence of the untranslatable. (2007: 246)

*Do you think it is possible that 'non-TS' scholars, when they are drawn to taking an interest in translation, are attracted in particular by its difficulties its impossibilities – a philosophical interest in the intractability of language and the fundamental impossibility of human communication? While in contrast TS scholars, most of whom probably also have a professional and/or literary interest in translation, rather than solely a philosophical one, will tend to see translation as a positive act – an instance of communication/mediation that, however imperfect, will always be an improvement on the alternative of no mediation at all?*

I think you make an important point: that there is, on the part of some (not all) TS scholars, an investment in the hope that translation will, for all its imperfections, connect and communicate something of the essential meaning of the original. As historians, we tend to be more sceptical because, I suspect, we think of translation as a kind of unresolved dialectic. The possibility of translation is undergirded by its impossibility, and thus the persistence of the untranslatable.

At the same time, I take this impossibility, or this untranslatability as in fact the workings of a kind of resistance. Not everything can be reduced to a unitary meaning or to the categories of the receiving culture. As you know, the ancient Romans tried to do this with Greek texts, and succeeded only when they obliterated and conquered the original, substituting Latin names for Greek. Successful translation comes at a price: the repression and the forgetting of the original, the vernacular, and the complexity of the life worlds they are part of.

But the persistence of untranslatability, thanks to what I've been calling the *insurgency of language*, is a sign that such conquest is not and never will be complete. There is always resistance. There is the permanent possibility of a war of meaning against those who seek to use translation to prop up structures of power. For this reason, there is always more to translate, more to say. Translation does not convey meaning whole and untouched; rather it inflects and distorts it, leaving it open-ended, hence, available for on-going revision, subversion and supplementation. I take this to be both a promise and a risk. There is in the very working of untranslatability the hope for some other possibility to emerge apart from

dominant structures of power. But there is also the risk that it may not, and what happens is that a more sophisticated, more penetrating and more comprehensive set of power relations emerge (witness, for example, the emergence of neo-liberalism and its variegated discourses).

This negative hope, or what some have called cruel optimism, is what I take to resonate between your work on fascism and my own on the Spanish and United States empires.

### 1.9 *The importance of specificity in history*

*I must admit that I have some reservations about the way you portray the role of interpreters in Iraq as being somehow emblematic of translation in wartime. It seems to me important to note that the treachery you speak of in the quote above, in 1.8 (Rafael 2007: 245) is not inherent in translation but is inherent in armed conflict. Consider, for example, the role of Italian-speaking soldiers and interpreters in the US military during the campaign in Italy in 1943-44. Despite the many apparent parallels with Iraq, from a historical point of view the situations are very different and so was the role of translation. Given that in this context the Allies were widely perceived as a 'liberating' presence, then the sense of treachery, the sense of the untranslatable, the sense of the ambivalent and suspicious role of the interpreters themselves that you describe in Iraq were presumably not present during the Italian campaign – where it was possible to be both a loyal US soldier and be familiar with Italian culture and language, and where any Italian who knew enough English to mediate with the Allies would not have been perceived as betraying his/her origins. So that the qualities that you ascribe to wartime translation, I would argue, are actually qualities that belong to the specific historical context you were looking at, rather than translation in wartime generally. Another interesting comparison can be made with role of interpreters in France in 1944 and in Bosnia (cf. Footitt 2012), both instances in which the ambivalent and potentially treacherous nature of the interpreter's role was less marked than in Iraq. The point, in my opinion, is that if we begin to look closely at each historical situation, then it becomes very difficult to generalise about translation in situations of conflict without losing significant elements of historical specificity. Footitt makes this point very well:*

In this research, conclusions about the place of languages in war are generally drawn on the basis of data relating to these contemporary deployments [in Afghanistan and Iraq], with an implicit assumption that the position of the interpreter in such conflicts is likely to be somewhat similar to that in other wars; that war, and therefore the interpreter's role within it, will not necessarily change from one conflict to another. Historians, on the other hand, whilst accepting that there are clearly tragic constants in war-making [...] generally view the activities associated with conflict as radically context-dependent, as being framed by the particular historical and geopolitical circumstances which have produced the war in the first place. Just as most historians would be uneasy extrapolating from one particular war in order to generalize about something like soldier/civilian relations, so they are likely to view as potentially unhistorical any template of interpreter

activity in conflict outside the specifically drawn circumstances of a particular war.  
(2012: 218-9)

I agree with you about the need to specify the particular contours and history of war to understand how translation and the role of interpreters work. In the case of Iraq, interpreters find themselves working for what the majority perceived to be an occupying force. In the case of Italian translators, (or French or others) during WWII, you could argue that they were working for allied forces. So the relationship will be dramatically different in the two situations.

The ambivalent position and identity of the interpreter is also a recurring theme in histories of colonial conquests, especially in the Americas. The story, as Tzevan Todorov wrote about many years ago, of La Malinche (Todorov 1996), the native woman working as a translator for the conquistador Hernan Cortez, is instructive. It would bear comparing to, say, the work of Navajo Indians working to provide code to the US forces during world war II, or scientists such as Allan Turing working to break the German codes during the same war. The politics of translation will always differ depending on the nature of the conflict and the stakes of the interpreters in that conflict. So yes, I would definitely say that the situation of Iraqi translators in US-occupied Iraq can be generalized in areas where native interpreters are recruited to work for an occupying power; but would have to be qualified in conflicts where they are working with allies.

#### *1.10 The historical status of translation*

*In The Promise of the Foreign you say:*

In the history of Filipino nationalism, then, Castilian presented an array of possibilities. To seize upon these possibilities was to recognise and respond to the promise of the foreign. It is these acts of recognizing, responding, and thereby assuming responsibility for what comes before and beyond oneself that comprise what I take to be the practice of translation. (Rafael 2005: 14)

*This is an interesting point. A key issue here, that you allude to in 1.7 when you talk of hierarchy, is one of status. The process of translation that you describe here, the adoption of Castilian as an emancipating lingua franca, as a linguistic currency that made its possessors equal in the way that the possession of wealth can bring together with a semblance of equality people of very different social backgrounds; this process was possible, it seems to me, because of the high status enjoyed by what was, after all, the language of the colonial masters. There was evidently no shame or sense of debasement attached to adopting Castilian, and there was no shame attached to exploiting Castilian as a means to enhance a national identity on the part of the Filipinos.*

*This contrasts interestingly – in my research – with the view many (though not all) fascists had of translation as a sign of weakness. Because the implication was that any intercultural/inter-linguistic engagement would necessarily take place with an 'inferior' interlocutor, then such exchange was always seen as a kind of debasement and corruption (cf.*

2.5 below). *Because of the value attributed to the notion of an original Italian identity which had to be recovered, then any engagement with the foreign, any importation via translation, was more likely to be seen as a form of pollution than of enrichment.*

*This point is also interesting because you appear to be defining a notion of 'practice of translation' that is quite different to the way this would normally be understood within translation studies. If I have understood correctly, your idea of a practice of translation is a philosophical one; it is a way of being and a way of interpreting oneself in relation to others. This, it seems to me, is quite different to the standard TS portrayal of the translator as a mediator (and the consequent impulse to underline his/her undervalued importance).*

\* \* \*

*What you seem to be saying in the introduction to Contracting Colonialism (Rafael 1988: 15-17) is that there is no history of the Tagalog that predates the arrival of the Spanish and their description of Tagalog culture and society. So Tagalog history only came into being the moment that it was translated into Spanish: so it was actually born through translation. This is a fascinating idea and not one that I have come across before.*

\* \* \*

*In Contracting Colonialism you say:*

Considered as both an aesthetic and a politic of communication, translation not only discloses the ideological structure of colonial rule; it also illuminates those residual but recurrent aspects of Tagalog history—the history, for example, of “fishing” and “hunting”—which set it apart from the received notions of cultural syncretism and historical synthesis. (Rafael 1988: 22)

*I was struck by this passage because it appears to be an example of the kind of approach to translation history that I have been advocating: that is using translation – as a concept/paradigm, as a historical event, as a documentary source – in order to gain insight into a historical object/subject which is not, in itself, strictly related to translation (Filipino nationalism in your case, fascism in mine).*

I completely agree with your reading of my work (and was fascinated with the contrast between the Filipino nationalist and the Italian Fascist conceptions of translation). And I am especially in agreement with you regarding your comment on *Contracting Colonialism* about the way translation is most useful when it emerges as a historical event rather than theorized from the outset as an—often reified—object of inquiry.

## **2. History and Translation Studies**

Christopher Rundle responds to questions (*in italics*) by Vicente Rafael

## 2.1 *The manifestations of power observed through translation*

*I was struck by this following passage from the introduction to the book you co-edited with Kate Sturge, Translation Under Fascism:*

[W]e assume that translations are always active interventions into texts, brought about by multiple agents with multiple interests, and that they are always active interventions into the cultural and thus political environment of the receiving language. By importing ideas, genres and fragments of different cultural worlds, translations will affirm or attack domestic realities (see Venuti 1995); they are never neutral in their impact or in their representation of the sending cultures. Furthermore, translations can have an important symbolic value, as a phenomenon which reflects, or is considered to reflect, the prestige of either the source culture or the receiving culture – an issue of particular importance in this volume. The study of translations is pursued here as a means of tracing the contours of that receiving environment: translation as an indicator of cultural and political processes at work. We contend that this makes translation practices a prime area of interest for scholars of fascist cultural policy and a field that can potentially cast light on issues of central concern to the study of all the four regimes we set out to examine. (Rundle & Sturge 2010: 4)

*I understood in this passage a deep convergence with my own project of tracing the history of the politics and ideology of translation in both imperial Spain and imperial United States in the colonial Philippines and also in the more contemporary moment of the 'global war on terror.' That is, that translation is a way of tracking the manifestations of power at specific historical moments, but also a way of seeing those power relations come undone.*

There are certainly historical moments in which the importance of language in the exercise of power is even greater than usual. This is particularly true where some form of intercultural relations are involved, relations which can bring the features of the interacting cultures into sharper focus. This is why translation can be so revealing in imperialist situations, in which one culture is trying to dominate another, or where a regime seeks to shape its people also by means of language.

In reference to Fascist Italy, there is also a further dimension to the insights that translation can bring, and that is the way translation can reveal the collective psychology of a system of power. In its interaction with other cultures, a system of power betrays its own fears and insecurities and these are clearly manifested in its policies towards translation. So any regime with ambitions of exerting close control over the cultural environment and making sure that it is compatible with its ideological agenda, will need to decide what stance to take when it comes to interaction with other cultures that are beyond its control. It follows that the level of alarm engendered by translation will be proportional to cultural insecurity of the regime.

## 2.2 *The importance of specificity in history*

*More broadly, as a historian but also as a translator, do you feel the tension between addressing the particular and the general: between, on the one hand, attending to the singularity of an event and the specificity of a text or a collection of texts, and on the other hand, generalizing about these events and these texts to make them legible and, more important, comparable to other histories and other cultures? How do you deal with this tension? How do you think this dilemma is specific to historians, or do you think it is something that is shared by other scholars across disciplines, e.g., anthropologists, sociologists and literary theorists?*

My own approach as a translation historian has been to choose a subject and try to become specialized in it – in my case, fascism. So I have rarely attempted to draw broader, more general conclusions that transcend the specifics of my chosen area. The exception to this is the volume I co-edited with Kate Sturge, *Translation Under Fascism*. Here the fascist, and post-fascist, regimes of Italy, Germany, Spain and Portugal are all examined from the point of view of translation. What we found was that the differences that emerged were in many ways more significant than the similarities. In other words, translation helped to distinguish some of the specific characteristics of each regime. This is actually in line with what emerges in fascism studies, where there is no clear consensus as to what constitutes a fascist regime, and where it is really the differences that emerge that are significant (cf. Griffin 1991; Payne 1980).

On a more general level, I think there is a tension in Translation Studies between the urge to seek the specific and the desire to generalize – one which is particularly evident in translation history. If you address the specific, and go into great depth, then in effect you find yourself detaching your chosen subject from a more general perspective on translation by virtue of the fact that you are focusing on ways in which this specific instance is distinct. The natural consequence of this, in my experience, is that you tend to relate your research not to other research on translation, but to other research on your chosen historical subject. However, I think it is fair to say that most translation historians don't share this approach – and there are many who probably actively disagree with it (cf. the responses to my position paper, Rundle 2012). The idea that translation is still relegated to the margins of history continues to be prevalent in the discipline, in my opinion. The consequent desire to give it greater visibility, for its real importance to be recognized, makes it natural to want to find a way to unite different historical contexts into a single narrative on translation. I also think that this more generalizing urge is encouraged by some of the other disciplinary approaches within translation studies which influence the way that translation history is conceptualized, such as the sociological approach (e.g. Sapiro 2014).

## 2.3 *A choice of audience: translation or historical studies?*

*Related to the question above is the other big question you put forth in your essay 'History through a Translation Perspective' (Rundle 2011): is translation an object or a means of historical research? How can a social history of translation practices contribute to the*

*enlargement and deepening of Translation Studies as a whole? Conversely, how can social and political historians learn from the literature of Translation Studies? Or, as you seem to suggest, does historical research (and its necessary imbeddedness in the historiography of a given area or period) always going to be at odds with Translation Studies, that one field must be sacrificed in order to do justice to the other? If so, what would be the nature and effects of this sacrificial ethos?*

I think the important thing to underline here is that I see this essentially as a choice of audience; the rest is a consequence of this initial choice. It also comes down to the type of insight you wish to communicate and whether translation is its primary focus – the object itself – in which case it is natural to address translation scholars, or whether translation acts as a lens through which to examine a historical subject, in which case it is more natural to address other historians of that subject. The majority of research published on translation history is explicitly addressed to translation scholars and is published in translation venues. And, as we noted in 1.4 and 1.5, not much of this filters down into historical studies. So it is not so much that historical research is at odds with translation studies, but rather that there is, as you put it, an *asymmetry of engagement* between history and translation. So the point of my argument is to consider what the consequences are when you consciously make the choice to address non-TS historians, when you try to contribute directly to the historiography of your subject rather than to translation studies. However, I don't see this as a sacrifice; it is just a logical step if you wish to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to translation history.

#### *2.4 The material history of translation*

*You also focus on publishing, censorship and distribution as ways of regulating translation. These topics suggest that a historical account of translation practices cannot be divorced from the material conditions of their production. Would you say that your work tends towards this materialist account of translation, and sets it apart from other works in translation studies? Are there other historians who share your approach?*

In my own research on translation under fascism I have not devoted much time to examining actual texts and the way in which they were translated. In making this choice I was simply taking my cue from the concerns expressed in the debate on translation at the time, which focused very little on individual texts, authors and their translators, and much more on translation as a publishing phenomenon. So I found that my research was effectively becoming a form of book history – one in which the material conditions of production, distribution and control were very important. I think that this treating of translation as a form of book history, rather than history of texts and how they were translated/received, is probably quite unusual. It was also different from earlier historical accounts on translation in Fascist Italy which tended to focus on the contribution that translations made to the literary development of certain key writers of the time (cf. Ferme 2002), accounts that were much closer to the kind of literary translation history that you might expect and which referenced TS literature and paradigms.

I would say, therefore, that this focus that you have identified was a natural one given that my subject was fascism. I would also say that the material history of books as part of the social history of a culture is one where Translation Studies has a clear contribution to make.

## 2.5 *Translation and fascism*

*In your work, you argue that translation is a kind of lens through which one can better see both the cultural life and the State apparatus—its workings and its shortcomings—of fascism. I understand this to mean that there is something about translation practices that are not wholly reducible to either culture or the State. There is something excessive about translation that escapes cultural conventions and the commands of the State. Is this correct? Would this be consistent with your argument about the hostility of conservatives and fascists towards translation in Italy: that there was something about it that eluded their capacity to manage its effects? And if so, what is it about translation that allows it to exceed these categories? How is the historian to deal with this curious nature of translation as at once cultural and political, yet able to exceed both?*

I think this is a very interesting point, particularly in relation to fascism. The key to translation in this context is that it necessarily implies some form of interaction with an 'other'. During the less xenophobic period (roughly 1926-35) the fascist regime was able to view this interaction with a degree of detachment. Translation was a cause for concern amongst those members of the cultural establishment who, for a variety of reasons, tended to sponsor a very inward-looking and nationalist concept of culture and who considered most foreign culture to be decadent and any interaction as a potential source of moral and aesthetic corruption. There were also those who were hostile towards translation because they (correctly) saw them as a phenomenon that was transforming the literary market and threatening their livelihood. It is not hard to imagine how these writers, whose novels might sell 3-5,000 copies over a period of years, must have felt when the first dedicated crime series in Italy sold in the region of 50,000 copies in the first month (Rundle 2010: 41). But none of this was really a cause for concern for the regime. There was even an iconoclastic, anti-bourgeois, element to fascism that probably enjoyed seeing Italy's cultural elite being forced down from their *ivory towers* by the sheer economic impact of (mostly translated) popular fiction being published on an industrial scale by new and ambitious young publishers.

All this changed, however, in the mid-1930s when Italy embarked on its colonial enterprise. A colonial conquest is premised on an idea of moral, cultural and martial superiority; a *superior* culture is one that should be engaging in a process of cultural expansion abroad, not one that distinguishes itself as the most receptive (i.e. passive) culture in the world. So, for example, publishers could be congratulated on their "very useful work of penetration" (Rundle 2010: 87 n.28) when they succeeded in selling the translation rights for an Italian novel; but when figures were published showing just how many translations Italy was publishing, and how few Italian books were being translated

abroad, this *translation deficit* became a political embarrassment and had to be minimized (Rundle 2010: 55-9).

What all this really boils down to is a question of international status – and in this respect Italian Fascism differed both from German Nazism and also from post-fascist regimes such as Francoist Spain and the Estado Novo in Portugal. The Fascist regime was always very concerned with its status in the eyes of key international players – particularly the US and the colonial powers such as France, Germany and Great Britain. The reaction of the League of Nations to Italy's invasion of Ethiopia showed that Britain and France were not prepared to allow Italy to join the exclusive club of the great colonial powers. This was a snub that Mussolini would never forgive, and the result was a marked shift in Italian foreign policy towards close (and ultimately disastrous) ties with Germany. From this period onwards, the state began to take an increasing interest in translations and very gradually started to exert pressure on the publishers who were responsible for importing all this foreign literature. It is striking however, and a testimony to the regime's appreciation of the political loyalty of the Italian Publishers Federation, that it wasn't until 1941-2 that the regime actually imposed concrete restrictions on translations and on the 'worst' manifestations of 'decadent' Anglo-American culture, such as crime novels (Rundle 2010: 184-97).

If the regime had chosen to restrict translations earlier it could have done so, but this would have damaged a loyal group of industrialists and a successful niche of the economy. It was not part of the political dispensation between the regime and the economic establishment for it to obstruct private enterprise. So it restricted itself to statements of purpose and individual, demonstrative acts of censorship. Only with the introduction of official racism and the exacerbated ideological climate of the war did the regime finally shed its inhibitions and introduce measures that were actually damaging to the publishers' economic interests.

There is another factor to consider when considering the extent to which translation appears to have eluded the full control of regimes like Fascist Italy. I think this says more about the nature of these regimes than about the nature of translation. It is clear for example, that although there was much less debate and anxiety about translation in Francoist Spain, they were actually far more strictly controlled than in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, simply because Francoist Spain was prepared to devote the necessary resources to systematically monitor books. Certainly in Fascist Italy, the regime never thought it worthwhile to monitor books that closely because they were not considered a mass form of entertainment in the way that cinema and theatre were. Until the 1940s, the regime didn't see books as a potentially dangerous influence and relied on the fact that they were published by a loyal group of publishers and were being read by a largely loyal middle class.

So the point is that if a regime thinks the situation warrants it, it can control translation to the same extent as it chooses to control literature/books generally. That this is the case

is borne out when we look at what happened in communist regimes such as the GDR (Thomson-Wohlgemuth 2006; 2009) or Estonia (Monticelli & Lange 2014). Here the entire production process was in the hands of state-owned structures: the publishing house, the printer, the distributor, and the bookseller were all state-owned, so it was practically impossible to publish a book that did not have state approval. This shows us that the impression we have of translation being a force that fascist regimes were not able to completely control is probably due also to the fact that these were regimes where book publishing remained a largely private enterprise.

## 2.6 *Translations of popular literature*

*In Italy during the 1920s and 30s, you point out that translation became a problem at the point when the Italian publishing industry began to flood the market with translations of romances, adventure stories and other genres of popular literature. Opposition came from both Italian authors and the cultural elites. What was so upsetting about these popular forms? Obviously, they represented economic competition to Italian writers. But could you say more about the aesthetic and ideological grounds for opposing them? Conversely, why had they become so popular? What was changing in Italian societies that allowed for such writing to become popular in the first place? What did the mass reading public see in these new literary genres? And why did that unnerve conservatives and other authorities?*

Perhaps it is best to begin by considering why popular fiction became so popular – what was the readership for this literature? The translation boom in the late 1920s early 1930s was the product of a number of different factors. There was a marked increase in levels of literacy. There was also an increase in white collar worker employment, especially among young women, leading to an increase in young people with some disposable income and a need for cheap and accessible entertainment. For example, popular novels sold in magazine format in railway station kiosks were a big success. Cinema became the dominant form of mass entertainment and created a demand for cultural products that gave people access to the glamorous lifestyles seen on film – a demand in part satisfied by translated popular fiction. This was also the period that saw the birth of the paperback novel and the launch of literature as a commodity product sold on industrial scale and using modern marketing methods. All these were innovations that were deeply threatening to the traditional artisan book-makers/sellers and the writers they published. These were, of course, innovations that were taking place in the rest of the industrialized world, as well.

Given this background, therefore, we have to be careful when interpreting the hostility shown towards translations: in many instances translations were probably being targeted more as symptoms of a much wider transformation in the market for popular entertainment, than as the cause. The terms in which important sections of the cultural establishment objected to translations were varied. They objected to the fact that translations were often of very *low-quality* literature that corrupted the tastes of the reading public turning them away from the aesthetically and artistically more sophisticated books being published by Italian authors. They complained that translations were often very badly done, with the

result that the reading public were also getting used to reading very poor quality Italian, thereby threatening the nascent national language (this was the first generation of Italians to be systematically encouraged to speak Italian rather than dialect). They also complained that the taste for translated popular fiction was indicative of an unhealthy interest in the 'decadent and corrupt' culture of countries such as Great Britain and the United States.

Translation also became caught up in the debate on modernity and the quest for a recognizably fascist culture. On the one hand there were those who sought a cosmopolitan modernity (represented first by France, then by Weimar Germany, and then by America) and who felt that the best way to stimulate a fascist culture was in the interaction with all that was best in world culture; on the other hand there were those who equated the idea of fascist culture with a notion of *pure*, anti-bourgeois, Italian culture and who saw most interaction with foreign cultures – particularly the morally bankrupt United States and Great Britain – as a form of corruption.

*I'm very struck by the rhetoric of Italian elites and officials in framing the translation of popular literature as amounting to an attack on the Italian language. It was the very integrity of the language itself, and by extension an idealized notion of Italian national culture that was under siege. Translation then was a kind of war, by other means, absorbed into the discourse of national-racial purity. Would you agree with this characterization? (and here I see another point of convergence between your interests and mine).*

On the whole, yes. Part of the difficulty in understanding this period lies in the very protean nature of fascism and the many different kinds of intellectuals it was able to attract. Both the ultra-modernist writer who welcomed the competition of foreign fiction for the stimulus that it would provide, and the ultra-conservative nationalist writer who sought a new purity in evocations of an idealised rural life, were loyal to the regime and looked to fascism to provide them with answers.

The perceived attack on the Italian language was, perhaps, more the result of the perceived poor quality of the translations. The reasoning was that cheap translations of cheap novels published in cheap paperback format could only result in poorly-written texts; all part of a general cheapening and commodification of Italian culture. The real culprits, in the eyes of these critics, were the publishers who were unpatriotically flooding the market for the sake of personal profit and they came in for much more criticism, interestingly, than the actual readers, who tended to be viewed as an anonymous mass that was incapable of discernment and was easily manipulated.

However, I have always thought that some of these complaints need to be taken with a pinch of salt. If you were a writer feeling threatened by your inability to compete with highly successful foreign authors, it was much easier to respond with rhetoric about the integrity of the Italian language than it was to admit that you didn't have the ability to rise to the challenge that these translations posed.

Also, overall the debate in Fascist Italy about translation did not focus on the integrity of the language and it was not an issue that the regime (as opposed to some members of the cultural establishment) gave much attention to when it came to translation. The key issue in the eyes of the regime was that the figures of the translation industry, which were available for the first time thanks to the *Index Translationum*, and which clearly showed Italy to be the single biggest publisher of translations, were seen as a sign of cultural weakness. The image created by these figures of a highly receptive nation that was unsuccessful in exporting its own culture abroad (in marked contrast to Germany) were deeply embarrassing to the cultural arm of the regime, because they gave the lie to the fascist claim that never, since the time of the Roman Empire, had Italy enjoyed such a period of international dominance and prestige.

### 3. Concluding remarks

What emerges clearly from this dialogue is that where there is a shared interest in the politics of language then the disciplines of history and translation engage very fruitfully with each other; while an asymmetry persists with those historians who maintain a narrow view of language as simply a means to an end. It is also significant that in both our cases translation emerged naturally from our research as a historical event rather than being imposed at the outset as a primary object. Translation provides both of us with a concept, an interpretative key, an approach to a specific historical moment in which language and cultural exchange play a particularly significant role. Translation allows us to trace the workings of power and to cast its features into relief as it interacts with other cultures. Finally, the other common feature to emerge from our research is the way in which translation can become a weapon wielded in the service of an ideological project that sees language, and interlinguistic exchange, as a theatre of war in which to fight for influence and dominance.

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