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## A Reappreciation of Cannibal Translation as Critique of Ideology

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## A Reappreciation of Cannibal Translation as Critique of Ideology

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### ABSTRACT

Cultural hegemony has been widely discussed within the field of Translation Studies. However, few scholars proposed a method of political action to erase the thumbprint of hegemony found in many translated works. In my opinion, the concept of “cannibal translation” developed by Haroldo de Campos is an exception (De Campos & Wolff, 1986). This form of translation is a way to regain control over the meaning of existing discourses and of the systems of representations that govern our daily lives. This paper will rely on a strong theoretical background, in order to argue for the realization of a form of militancy within the boundaries of the systems of representations of language itself, in order to stop seeing the world with the “imperial eyes” (Mary Snell-Hornby, 2006) of cultural hegemony, namely of English tongue and culture in Canada and its industries in Colombia. Finally, I will approach militant translation as a method of “ideological criticism,” as understood by Slavoj Žižek, who defines ideology as a “unconscious fantasy that structures social reality” (García & Sánchez, 2008).

**Keywords:** Harold de Campos, militant translation, cultural hegemony, cannibalism, ideology

### Introduction

In what way is translation political, one might ask? Isn't translation merely a means to understand one another? Not quite. In Canada, the Official Languages Act, enacted in 1969, marked a new beginning for translation within governmental institutions. Why? It was also a year of political turmoil in Quebec, Canada's French-speaking province. Also around the same time, operation “McGill Français” took place, a huge protest that took the streets of Montreal to challenge the anglophone elite's control over knowledge and the access to education at the time mostly limited to the English-speaking minority of the province. Translation, for the state, was then a way to end a political crisis without undermining its hegemony. Not long after came the October Crisis, during which politician Pierre Laporte and British diplomat James Richard Cross were kidnapped, the former eventually killed and the latter released in exchange for asylum in Cuba for the perpetrators (Fournier, 1982). The Canadian government responded with a widespread repression of political movements in Quebec. By 1976, the arrival in power of the more moderate Parti Québécois solved the crisis, along with translation, as Canada would then officially be a bilingual country. These

events signified the end of a period of political and revolutionary unrest and an almost total disappearance in the mainstream of activists influenced by the Cuban and Algerian revolutions. Canadian hegemony would then continue to consolidate to this day, both within and outside its borders. The Canadian colonial system still stands, even though issues concerning indigenous peoples and an unfair immigration system are currently put forward. Our research question for this paper is the following: To what extent can activist translation contribute to liberation from the cultural hegemony imposed by colonial dynamics? To answer that particular question, the concepts of Canadian imperialism and activist translation will first be described. Then, cannibal translation, a concept originating from Brazil, shall be explored as another way to challenge cultural hegemony.

### Canadian Imperialism

The Official Languages Act, enacted in 1969, gave translation its current status in Canadian institutions and paved the way to the proliferation of a vast bureaucracy that took it as its main function, a facade characteristic of the “society of the spectacle,” a concept put forward by Debord, who stated: “L’écriture est son arme [à l’État]. Dans l’écriture, le langage atteint sa pleine réalité indépendante de médiation entre les consciences [...], qui est celle de l’administration de la société” (Debord, 1967: 82).

To better understand, it is necessary to further analyze the Canadian system. Although Canada is a country that has experienced relatively few armed conflicts on its territory, it was not, at the time of the turmoil of the 1960s, at its first insurrection. The country experienced the Patriots’ revolt in 1837–1838, which had been repressed, but not without causing difficulties for the ruling power. In 1849, riots broke out over a law to compensate for the Patriots’ revolt, leading to the burning of the Montreal Parliament and its relocation to Toronto and finally to Ottawa, an event which, according to historians Robert Comeau and Gaston Deschênes (Comeau & Gaston Deschênes, n.d.), is very rarely discussed. The Canadian order, established and consolidated by the Confederation Act in 1867, developed more subtle and effective control mechanisms (Pilon, 2017: 105- 123), and amongst them, was translation.

The Confederation Act signed in 1867 launched the Industrial Revolution and transferred the country from a feudal system to a capitalist system. This transition took place by taking over indigenous lands and exploiting the labour force of displaced communities, French-Canadian populations and, finally, those of immigrant origin, particularly Irish at the time. This project was initiated by John A. MacDonald with, among other things, his railway project, in order to consolidate the British regime, a kind of revolution from above in response to the threats posed by both the Patriots’ revolt and the American Revolution (Klassen, 2014: 10). The current system is a continuation of the one built by MacDonald, as stated by Klassen:

“First, Canadian Foreign policy has always expressed a certain mode of class and state formation in the domestic political economy. Second, Canadian foreign policy has always developed in the context of global systems of empire or imperialism”

(Klassen, 2014: 14).

In a capitalist context, translation has been commodified and used by the authorities. The very existence of the academic education of Canadian “translating subjects” is therefore, by its genesis, subordinated to a broader framework that is undoubtedly imperialist. The works of Jean Delisle (Jean Delisle, 2003) and the *Stylistique comparée du français et de l’anglais*<sup>1</sup> of Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean-Louis Darbelnet (Jean-Paul Vinay & Darbelnet, Jean-Louis, 1958), the two most widely used references in Canadian translation curriculums are fully in line with this framework. These authors discussed the difference between the “génie de la langue”<sup>2</sup> or idiomatics of the two languages. Such idiomatics are the result of a certain elitist tradition, maintained in particular by grammarians and “great authors”: it is not the language of all speakers. Roland Barthes, rather than elevating constraining tradition of language as a “génie”, criticized it by speaking of “fascism” (Noghrehchi, 2017). That said, these “fascist-oriented,” linguistic constraints could be analyzed as part of a form of political economy of language, because, according to Barthes, language “forces us to say”, to produce discourse or value, in the same way that the capitalist market economy and related political systems force us to produce ever more, without the most basic needs of a large part of the population being met, or those of a large part of the speakers. For example, women remain marginalized by the phallographic structures of the French language. Not realizing this and accepting this framework as self-evident places us in a position of “alienation belt” or “alienating machine”, echoing Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980), meaning that such discourses are constantly produced in order to keep their recipients in a state of alienation, no matter how many illusions they succeed in shattering. Antoine Berman also states:

“Un traducteur sans conscience historique est un traducteur mutilé, prisonnier de sa représentation du traduire et de celles que véhiculent les “discours sociaux” du moment” (Berman, 1995: 61).<sup>3</sup>

In other words, translators, unless made aware and engaged in subversion of hegemony, reflect a totality or another, depending on the place and time. Could they be described as “organic intellectuals” in the sense given to the concept by Gramsci, that is, as people who are committed to building the discourse of the state and its bourgeoisie (Piotte, 1970)? Very likely so.

## Ideology

Before going further, it is necessary to define ideology. Quite a few definitions, such as the ones given by Marianne Lederer and François Rastier in Guillaume D’Astrid book on the subject (D’Astrid, 2016), were proposed by scholars in the field of translation, but not one comes across as being as precise and as all-encompassing as the one proposed by Slovenian philosopher Slavoj

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<sup>1</sup> Compared Stylistic of French and English (author’s translation)

<sup>2</sup> Literally, the “genius of the language” or its particular forms of expressions.

<sup>3</sup> “A translator without historical consciousness is a mutilated translator, trapped in his representation of the translator and in those conveyed by the ‘social discourses’ of the moment.” (author’s translation)

Žižek, who describes it as an “unconscious fantasy that structures social reality” (García & Sánchez, 2008). Žižek describes how, after the fall of the Soviet Union at the end the 90s, scholars like Francis Fukuyama announced the end of history and the triumph of capitalism (Fukuyama, 1992). The function of ideology is to preserve the “supremacy of status quo”. According to Žižek, societies are, by the means of systems of communication and representation, are trained to surrender totally to “individualism and the fetishism of commodities,” which contribute to an almost total depolitization. Keeping in mind this understanding of the nature of function of ideology, nationalism could be described as essentially ideological. It would also be possible to assert that Canada is the result of a construction of socio-historical and political discourses and nothing more than an ideological substance agglutinated. In other terms, it is a fabric of unconscious fantasies that structure our own social reality and render the contradictions of Capital sustainable. This substance would take the form of military, bureaucratic, political and economic discourses and rituals that serve to perpetuate and regenerate this fabric of fantasy. The solution, according to Žižek, is to admit “critique of ideology” which consists of an absolute plurality of discourses. According to the philosopher, this plurality is necessary to maintain a tension between ideology and reality, a distinction that collapsed with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In any case, Žižek (2010) also asserts that only this particular tension would allow the development of concrete methods of political action against the alienation imposed by the international capitalist system and the “pleasures of self-destruction” imposed by this order (García & Sánchez, 2008). In *Living in the end times*, Žižek gives an interesting example that illustrates the implications of Ideology:

“When we are shown scenes of starving children in Africa, with a call for us to do something to help them, the underlying ideological message is something like: ‘Don’t think, don’t politicize, forget about the true causes of their poverty, just act, contribute money,, so you will not have to think” (Žižek, 2010).

In *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*, a documentary in which Žižek analyses ideology in films, he defines the term commodity, another important concept to understand ideology. For Žižek is not simply something that is bought and consumed. It is inhabited by “an invisible transcendence [... the very] excess which is the object of my desire.” Furthermore, he adds, the “desire is never simply the desire for a certain thing, it’s also always a desire for desire itself, a desire” (Žižek cited in (Fiennes, 2012).

### Activist Translation

Activist translation can be the work of research that “translates” the reality of oppressive systems in which professional translators and scholars have a share of responsibility. Salah Basalamah, professor of translation studies says “tout est traduction ou rien n’est signe” (Basalamah, 2009, pp. 109–110),<sup>4</sup> implying any act of shedding light on a matter. Interpretation, even perception are

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<sup>4</sup> “Everything is translation or nothing is a sign” (author’s translation)

all forms of translation, and maybe the very first step to an activist translation in the narrower sense of the word, since a translator needs to know the political dynamics underlying any dominant discourses to be translated. I already delivered such translations, analyzing, for example, some of the implications of Canadian mining and paramilitary activities in Colombia (Dubé-Belzile, 2017), thus highlighting another side of Canada and enabling to criticize the workings of its institutions, therefore translating its reality into an altogether different matrix of discourse. In the same way, I also wrote an article on Canada's lack of intervention in the genocide in Myanmar despite renewed economic ties, an attitude motivated by Canadian corporate interests (Alexandre Dubé-Belzile, 2018) in another attempt to translate the discourse of corporate medias into a counter-discourse that reveals its ideological foundation. I also produced translations in the more traditional of the word for the *Projet accompagnement solidarité Colombie*,<sup>5</sup> which participates in the struggles of Colombian peasants against Canadian mining companies and as an interpreter at the 2016 World Social Forum in Montreal (another edition had happened in 2006 in Karachi). Nevertheless, despite those achievements, activist translation has not reached its utmost expression, as it needs to challenge the structures of language itself.

Activist translation, as opposed to hegemonic translation, could then be a form of critique of ideology as understood by Žižek. Once again, “tout est traduction ou rien n'est signe” (Basalamah, 2009: 109–110).<sup>6</sup> Studies on the ideology, hegemony or political implications of translation abound in translation studies: Lawrence Venuti's work on the “invisibility of the translator” (Venuti, 2008), the descriptive studies inspired by Gideon Toury (Toury, 2012) and the work of Tymoczko (Tymoczko, 2007; 2010). With the very aim to challenge the “ecology of alienation”<sup>7</sup>, sociologist Boaventura da Sousa Santos describes translation as a “procedure allowing intelligibility between two world visions [...] without compromising their identity or autonomy, that is to say without reducing them to homogenous identities” (de Sousa Santos, 2010, author's translation). This work is also “crucial to define, in each context and each historical moment, which arrangement will secrete the strongest antihegemonic force” (de Sousa Santos, 2010, author's translation). Santos, sociologist and cofounder of the World Social Forum allows scholars, just like Basalamah's vision, to see translation from a much wider angle.

Bataille, French writer and essayist, had rather interesting ideas about arts and literature, which he saw as unproductive expenses, that is a form of subversion against discourse production as normally intended in a utilitarian and technocratic society, which characterizes the capitalist system (Bataille, 1967). It could be argued, then, that activist translation is also a form of unproductive expenditure. Furthermore, there are also clear avenues in Bataille's works for reaffirming Basalamah's idea about “civil disobedience” in translation, against the market

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<sup>5</sup> “Project accompany solidarity Colombia”, an organization working with human rights groups in Colombia.

<sup>6</sup> See note 4.

<sup>7</sup> The “Ecology of translation” is a term I coined to further explain Žižek's idea of the “supremacy of a status quo” as a perpetually maintained infrastructure of alienation, albeit a fragile one.



economy, as a sacrifice, a spiritual act of resistance against the oppression of International Capital. This approach to translation studies and, above all, the operations envisaged by a militant vision can undoubtedly be linked to research creation, an activity that still struggles to be recognized as a form of scientific research in its own right. It has the potential to renew analytical metalanguage by using means which are more traditionally associated with literary creation, but for political purposes.

Research creation in translation studies aims to analyse in particular the experience of the translator as a creator (Passos, 2007). Passos quotes Henri Meschonnic who states: “Nous partons du principe que traduire n’est traduire que quand traduire est un laboratoire d’écriture” (Meschonnic, 1999: 459).<sup>8</sup> This begs the question: is language also not a laboratory for political experiments. If this were the case, a translator’s task in this laboratory would be to “turn upside down the whole theater of representation within the order of desiring production: the very task of schizoanalysis”<sup>9</sup> (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972: 324, author’s translation). Therefore, language representation systems are chosen as the political space for activism. How should I do this? Cannibal translation seems to be a good start.

### **Cannibal Translation**

Cannibal translation was developed mainly by Haroldo de Campos (de Campos & Wolff, 1986). Campos was inspired by the *Manifesto antropófago* by Oswald de Andrade, published in 1928 in Brazil, which promoted cannibalism as a metaphor for cultural reappropriation in the face of Europe’s hegemony over “universal culture” (De Andrade, 2010). In a spirit of provocation, its author was inspired by the cannibalization of a Portuguese priest by members of the Tupinambá tribe, an incident that took place in the 16th century and then spread terror throughout Europe. When another body is ingested, it is ingested and becomes part of the eater. Therefore, a cannibal translator takes the power of the original discourse and uses it for its own purpose.

“Only anthropophagy unites us, whether socially or not, /economically, /or philosophically. [...] I only care what doesn’t belong to me./This is the law of man,/The one of the anthropophagus” (de Andrade, 2010).

In *Translation Studies: Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi discuss the concept of cannibal translation, developed in Brazil by Haroldo de Campos from the 1960s and closely inspired by Oswald de Andrade’s manifesto. The authors explain how cannibalism was perceived by the indigenous people of Brazil as a way to honour and appropriate the forces of an enemy. They also explain how colonization could be conceived as a

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<sup>8</sup> “It is assumed that translating is only translating when translating is a laboratory for writing” (author’s translation)

<sup>9</sup> Developed by French poststructuralist psychoanalyst and philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the 70s, the concept of schizoanalysis is the very essence of critique of ideology. It is based on the idea that the alienation of the schizophrenic is the reflection of alienation within society. Therefore, madness is only a subversion of the alienated social order, just like activist translation as a critique of ideology.

forceful possession in the carnal sense and, furthermore, how the populations of the colonized continent appeared to the eyes of colonizers just as fertile lands to be inseminated and civilized.

Cannibalism is a metaphor to describe a form of translation that is nourished by universal culture, but which systematically refuses to obey the source text. In a way, this form of translation seems rather appropriate it is realized that the effects of colonialism are so deeply rooted in our lives that there is no way to go back to what we were before such colonization. Cannibalistic translation breaks with power relations, horizontalizes hierarchy and annihilates the “logocentrism” of language, a concept used by Jacques Derrida to describe a discourse that refers to itself as the only existing possible monolithic framework for thought processes (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1998). In many parts of the world, societies trying to escape cultural hegemony adopted a nationalist stance, often banning the use of foreign languages or the diffusion of foreign cultural products. In Canada, even though the province of Quebec never totally escaped colonial rule, its government intended to impose French as a dominant language and restraint the expansion of English cultural products. Cannibal translation, rather than blocking foreign influence, literally eats it. For example, Shakespeare was translated in Quebec in the local French slang in order to sabotage the hegemonic characteristics of the original text. Shakespeare thus became French Canadian, or, at least, thus was the intention of translators like Michel Garneau. In another paper published in *The Utopian Impulse in Latin America*, Odile Cisnero, researcher at the University of Alberta, in Canada, proposes the term “ecocannibalism”, allowing Campos’s ideas to flourish even more radically. She states:

“The ecological balance of this natural environment was disrupted by the arrival of the white man and his ‘objectified,’ ‘corpse-like ideas,’ his ‘codification of Magic’, and his ‘catalogs, antagonistic sublimations.’[...] In Eurocentric thinking, magic is no longer a life force, but a codified system, and plants are no longer living beings and forces”(Cisnero, 2011).

According to Cisnero, Cannibal Translation has the potential to challenge the very framework of Eurocentric thinking and, consequently, the very structures of languages, possibly its grammar and even the authority of its “great authors”, by translating works with an intent to “digest them” and suppress their authority. The most important aspect of cannibal translation though is probably its openness for its own cannibalization as nothing prevents its use for other purposes, such as critique of Ideology, as understood by Žižek and as a practice of activist translation. Haroldo de Campos has himself cannibalized many works into Brazilian Portuguese by authors such as Goethe, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Mayakovsky, Mallarmé, Dante and Octavio Paz, using their power as a means of emancipation for Brazil.

Another element could also be added. In Cisnero’s ideas are found notions addressed by William S. Burroughs, the sulfurous author of the Beat Generation, one of the first to use “cut-ups” of texts (and literature) in an attempt to escape the control of language. Burroughs also said, “You see control can never be a means to any practical end.... Control can never be a means to anything but more control ... like Junk” (Burroughs, 2001). The word “junk” is used here to signify opiates, mainly heroine. In his article *Apomorphine Silence: Cutting-up Burroughs’s Theory of*



*Language and Control*, researcher Cristopher Land discusses Burroughs's theories and the purpose of his "cut-ups". The latter were intended as a method of emancipation from writing, liberation from the control imposed by the "virus-word", a parasite that structures thought and impose an alienating, categorizing "I" (Land, 2005). Cut-ups consisted of writing new texts by using clippings of anterior texts. It could be said of the method of William S. Burroughs that cut-ups cannibalize existing text, just like cannibal translation.

## Conclusion

A lot more could be said about cannibal or activist translation. Nevertheless, the aim of this paper was merely to pave the way for a new understanding of the work of a translator as an activist while putting emphasis on Cannibal Translation in the process. This article, though mainly theoretical, is the result of reflections rooted in my practice as an activist translator and on the Canadian context, briefly described at the beginning. It is hoped that it will serve its purpose and inspire further exploration within all fields of expertise.

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