

Discussion and response to papers by Prof. Richardson and Prof. Wang

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Both papers explore, in a very condensed manner, two important theoretical issues directly touching upon the transgression of cultural boundaries. Let me start by responding to Prof. Wang's paper.

He makes refreshing use of a notion we have long forgotten ever since William Empson wrote of seven types of it. I am in complete agreement with him concerning the function of ambiguity in displacing the binaries, which, he writes, only evoke "opposition," which is an exclusion. His two examples: the hodgepodge Chinese MTV and the Neo-*San Zi Jing*, which both substantiate and dismantle party philosophy, are also very interesting. I would, however, suggest that his arguments would further be enriched if the notion of agency were introduced. For instance, consider his examples of the students in uniform singing Madonna and those in bikini and with a Red Army cap singing a revolutionary song (I would sure like to have seen them, by the way!). Now, for whom are they the misplacement of symbols? The answer, says Prof. Wang, is mainly for the administration. China is then identified with socialist authorities. Although I am not particularly familiar with the current cultural situation of China, I doubt if the students created such performance from a like perspective, i.e. with the intention of displacing symbols. At least, had the performance in question been viewed by a young Japanese audience, ambiguity might not have taken place. A youngster like me with a taste for progressive rock and roll would remember the concerts of a Japanese group, the Yellow Magic Orchestra, which played metallic synthesized music of Kraftwerk's kind, in fact wearing Red Army caps. Likewise, if the performance of the bikini girls with Red Army caps is a shock to the Chinese authorities, pornography with women in military outfits is a cliché in the Western world. Here again is an opportunity to ask my primary question concerning the theme of transgression of cultural borders. Who is crossing which borders? Who is, or is not, understanding who? Someone with a variety of national, cultural, linguistic, artistic, personal backgrounds and with a specific gender, class, age, ethnic distinction?

This leads me to the problem I had with Prof. Richardson's paper although on the whole I was much illuminated by the points he raised concerning the problem of translation and its relevance to the understanding of the other cultures. I am troubled by

his introductory assumptions: "A process of translation is involved in my own construction of the language: I must translate inchoate thoughts into a form ordered by the English language. In writing I need to translate my ideas into a code I have learned and which is only inadequately able to represent what I really wish to say." Now, whether an idea precedes a language or not is a major question, over which the linguists of the world are in untiring debate. Surely Marx thought it did not (*The German Ideology*). But Prof. Richardson dismisses that question quite nonchalantly: "In some strange way I know my idea exists prior to its conceptualization." Let us now leave this profound question with the linguists, but at least I should argue that Prof. Richardson's model is Cartesian: I have something in my mind the meaning of which is clear to me; the remaining task is merely to find out how to externalize that something correctly, using a language. But do we really know what is in our mind? Or is a message we have in our mind always consistent? Is it just the communication that spoils this consistency? Here I am mainly thinking of the psychoanalytical critique of the consciousness. According to it, one's idea is profoundly ambiguous and ambivalent even before it gets verbalized externally (Of course, for Lacan one's idea is always already verbal and ambivalent.) The consistency and the transparency of one's own mind is probably a modern Western myth, originating in Descartes and culminating in a complex manner in Husserl.

Prof. Richardson applies that personal communicative model (one's consistent idea gets communicated to an outer world with varying degrees of success) to cultural/linguistic communication, commonly termed translation. The same problem for me persists. A culture is taken to be an organic whole within which an interpretation is clear and transparent. Just as one knows what one is thinking, a Japanese knows the meaning of any Japanese cultural tradition which may or may not be correctly interpreted by a foreign observer. Against the grain of such a model, I'd like to use Prof. Wang's example: did the Chinese authorities know what the Chinese students were doing any better than a foreign observer? Prof. Richardson seeks to find a way of understanding properly the true idea of one's partner in conversation (the personal level) and the true picture of other cultures (the intercultural and inter-linguistic level). The presumption is that something consistent must be there, waiting to be correctly interpreted by an outsider. But, does such a thing really exist? I know that when I say this I risk discouraging people from understanding whatever is not within one's cultural/social horizon. Yet, I see at the same time the danger of a political order in taking for granted an un-ambiguous self, an un-ambiguous cultural coherence, here, there, and everywhere, with the presumption of a single, consistent (personal/cultural) identity.

As a matter of fact, Prof. Richardson aptly points out the connection between the issue of language and translation, and the issue of identity. But, here, too, I would like to point to the ambiguity of identity that, incidentally, renders the act of translation itself ambivalent. Prof. Richardson writes that he cannot renounce his British identity even if he wishes to do so. That could be true in Britain, but in Japan, breaking away from the trap of identity is quite easy. Just choose not to pay respect to the national flag and anthem during some official ritual. Voilà. One is a "*hikokumin*," a non-national, a Japanese who is not a Japanese. An article in the *Asahi Shimbun* (Dec. 2, Osaka edition) reports of a boy who refused to raise the flag at the sports festival and was interrogated by one of the organizers: "Aren't you a Japanese?" The article also reminds the readers of such a statement as the suggestion made earlier by the governor of the Gifu prefecture that any Japanese who does not respect the national flag or the anthem should renounce his/her citizenship. The Cartesian model of translation and the belief in a single identity are mutually complementary.

Some of the questions I raised concerning Prof. Richardson's paper are part of the larger question that has been, it seems to me, at stake all through our symposium. That question is: are there any human essentials not mediated by culture, language, codification, etc., yes or no? Prof. Richardson's answer is, yes, when he speaks of the human ideas that are subsequently verbalized and communicated with varying degrees of success. Prof. Oshima's answer, taken together with an Argentine anthropologist he quotes, is also yes: he points to a zero degree of ethics, and to faces without codification. I say, together with some of the participants, no. So does Clifford Geertz who writes about Bali mask theater actors in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. He writes that one tends to imagine a human being without any mask formulated by a culture with which he or she is associated, just like one can think of an actor of a Shakespearean play relaxing backstage and displaying his or her real self. But Geertz rejects that notion, insisting that a human being is always acting and is never without a mask.

I close my comments with this major question: should we assume a trans-linguistic, trans-semiotic, raw humanity, or not? We should have asked this at the beginning of our symposium, which may have led to completely different sets of strategies concerning the transgression of cultural borders.