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## Introduction

*by David Katan*

Clifford Geertz's article "Thick Description: Towards an Interpretative Theory of Culture", originally published in 1973, has recently made inroads into Translation Studies, and provides an excellent focus for this issue of *Cultus*. We agree with Geertz that "The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is ...to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them" (2000: 24). The common underlying belief is that world views (*weltanshaungs*, models of the world, narratives, ...) made visible through text or discourse, are not (and cannot) be simply transferred in the telling. These worlds are necessarily interpreted, both by the teller and the receiver.

Following Geertz's discussion of anthropological writings (2000: 9) "our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to". We are interested here in furthering understanding of these constructions to optimise communication. As the Journal's subtitle makes clear, we believe that the way is through intercultural mediation.

So, before Baker's criticism (see interview) we should clarify a mediator's core abilities (c.f. Katan 2004). These include the ability to (dis)associate; to take a meta or 3rd perceptual position; re-associate into a number of different conceptual worlds; and the ability to come up with creative solutions satisfying both worlds.

I will take the first ability to task here. With '(dis)association', what is required in particular is the ability to temporarily leave aside the pulls of the conceptual worlds in question, along with the ability to associate to a series of other frames external to the conceptual worlds in question. These may well include a clearly defined *skopos*, or a more generic 'professional conduct'. This still leaves, as Geertz noted "construction", or rather, perception, interpretation and evaluation of "the data", which by its very nature can never be entirely objective.

Hence, the translator needs to take a more meta, monitoring, "self reflexive" position (see both Baker and Scarpa in this issue; c.f. Katan 2001: 302). Many believe, though, that this position is never truly meta, and hence a mediator's "detached objectivity" is at best a "naive" ideal (see the interview with Baker). Geertz's comment, made over 30 years ago provides an excellent rejoinder: "I have never been impressed by the argument that as complete objectivity is impossible in these matters (as, of course, it is), one might as well let one's sentiments run loose. .. [It] is like saying that as a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible, one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer" (*ibid*: 30).

What Geertz calls for, instead, is a “thick description” of culture at work, which is an attempt (and never more than that) “to uncover the conceptual structures that inform our subjects’ acts” (ibid: 27). And, indeed, with great humility, he adds “Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is. It is a strange science whose most telling assertions are its most tremulously based in which to get somewhere with the matter in hand at hand is to intensify the suspicion, both your own and that of others, that you are not quite getting it right ... What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other” (ibid 29), which takes us neatly to the contents of this issue.

### 1. Ethics of renarration

The decision to ask Mona Baker to be interviewed about her views on the (im)possibility of mediation, one of the treatises in her recent book should be made explicit. First, many, but not all readers, will know that Baker is an internationally renowned translator scholar who also became known to the wider public for her support of the Academic Boycott of Israel as a response to Israeli hostilities in Palestine. This support resulted amongst other things in her decision to terminate the contracts of two leading scholars, members of the editorial board of *The Translator* because they continued to retain links with Israeli universities. As Baker is fully aware, this editor disagrees fundamentally with this solution to this particular conflict.

So, how do we justify including an author who believes in exclusion as a necessary response to conflict? First, precisely because we do not believe in academic boycotting. At the heart of the belief in intercultural communication is the decision to listen to, and dialogue with ‘the other’; to more fully understand their world, or as Baker terms them ‘narratives’. This does not mean to agree. A famous quotation, probably misattributed to Voltaire, frames this particular narrative: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

The second justification is because Baker *does* raise issues which need to be faced if we are to fully discuss ‘mediation’. In fact, Andrew Chesterman’s interview with Baker puts mediation to the test, focussing as it does on (armed) conflict and manipulation in translation. Interestingly, at the end of the interview, Chesterman manages to mediate a solution which satisfies both Baker’s position and that of the mediator. The solution parallels Russell’s Theory of Logical Types (c.f. Bateson 1972: 177ff). The theory states that there is a hierarchy of frames, and that while focussing on one frame, for example the *skopos* (the immediate functional aspects of a translation), one cannot concentrate on the *telos* (the ultimate goal, mission). Crucially, one frame does not preclude the other. Hence, mediation itself need not be dismissed, but (as Chesterman suggests) framed within a particular *telos*.

## 2. The translator's constrained role in mediating difference.

David Limon, following on from Baker raises similar questions regarding ethics and loyalty, this time not in the extreme context of military oppression, but within that of Anglo-American cultural norms. These dominate and “de-Slovenise” the small country’s particular values in terms of information, content, layout and stance on the web. Limon shows the difficulties a translator has in mediating between the two worlds. We also see, from Yamai Chen’s analysis of Taiwanese “trans-edited” news reports of US news focussing on Taiwan/China, how often the translator is constrained and conditioned in her ability to mediate or re-narrate international news.

## 3. Improving the quality of communication across languages.

Anthony Pym investigates the costs of improving communication across languages and cultures, and considers the effectiveness of (professional) translation compared to language training. On the way he attempts to unravel the “diversity paradox” of the rise of English as a lingua franca combined with a parallel rise in the use of translation.

Federica Scarpa focuses on professionalising translation training, and questions Baker’s “committed” stance. She reclaims the translator’s “activist” role in terms of what she sees as essential in improving quality: empirical/descriptive translation research and training which focuses on professional output.

## 4. Empirical results of translation mediation

Finally, Eliana Terminiello looks at film translation, and reports on the strategic importance of cultural mediation to make a film successful abroad. In particular, she looks at how irony in film has been translated from English into Italian, noting the extent to which a pattern can be discerned in the various translations of irony throughout the corpus. The suggestion is that the translators mediated to account for the inherent generic differences across the two cultures.

Bateson, G. 1972. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Geertz, C. 1973/2000. “Thick Description: Towards an Interpretative Theory of Culture”, in Geertz, C. (ed.) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, pp. 3-32.

Katan, D. 2004. *Translating Cultures: an Introduction for Translators, Interpreters and Mediators*. Manchester: St. Jerome.

Katan, D. 2001. “When Difference is not Dangerous: Modelling Intercultural Competence for Business”. G. Cortese and D. Hymes (eds), *Textus XIV*, 2, pp. 287-306.