

# THE SUBJECT AS TRANSLATOR: MIKHAIL BAKHTIN AND JEAN LAPLANCHE

Esther Peeren

ASCA (Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis)

## Introduction

If subjectivity is seen as fundamentally intersubjective, as occurring in-between self and other, then it appears as a double process of translation, both of the self and of the other. In this paper, I will explore how the subject is conceived as emerging through intersubjective translation in the work of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and that of the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche. Bakhtin proposes a view of the subject as constituted by a separate, external other, whose consummating utterances undergo a necessary process of partial transformation. Laplanche views the subject and the unconscious as the product of the other's address, which compels a task of translation that is never entirely successful. Although there are fundamental differences between the two theorists —not least Bakhtin's unequivocal rejection of psychoanalysis— both present the human individual as confronted with external, embodied others, whose utterances or messages it has to process or translate in order to assert itself as a subject.

## Bakhtin: semi-translation

In Bakhtin's work, translation is a central, if not often explicitly mentioned, aspect. It is implicit in Bakhtin's definition of the humanities as a discipline: "In the humanities, as distinct from the natural and mathematical sciences, there arises the specific task of establishing, transmitting and interpreting the words of others" (1996, p. 357). The same task of processing the other's words, which clearly involves a form of translation, defines the human subject.

For Bakhtin, we become self-conscious subjects only through the other, who is the bearer of "everything that pertains to me" (1986b, p. 138). When it enters the world, the infant appears as a "boundless, 'darkly stirring chaos' of needs and dissatisfactions", a state it surpasses only by way

of the other's words, which determine it from the outside, giving it form, name, and, through these, self-awareness:

The words of a loving human being are the first and the most authoritative words about him; they are the words that for the first time determine his personality *from outside*, the words that come to meet his indistinct inner sensation of himself, giving it a form and a name in which, for the first time, he finds himself and becomes aware of himself as *something*. (1990, pp. 49-50).

This scenario invests the other with the active, creative power to delineate the as-yet-undefined self into a bounded, named, and socially situated subject.

There is, however, in Bakhtin's account a noticeable tension between the other as a determining and the other as a merely recognizing entity. Does the other act as a constitutive, almost performative force that brings the subject into being by the power of language or does he simply recognize the subject that is already somehow contained in the infant? Another problem is the presumed passivity of the infant in the face of the other's determinations. Do these determinations have to be accepted as they are or is there room for negotiation? Because in "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" Bakhtin conceptualizes his theory of self and other by analogy with the hierarchical relationship between author and hero in literary texts, the self/hero appears utterly passive. Formed according to the other/author's delineations, he can do nothing to change them: "the hero will not take any active interest in the gift which the author makes of him and to him" (Jefferson, p. 157). What Bakhtin's early work lacks, mainly because of its literary focus, is precisely a theory of translation, which would present the self not as a passive receptacle, but as a translator actively engaging with the other's words.

Bakhtin's later work on dialogism, which pertains to social interaction, insinuates such a theory of translation by emphasizing the inevitable transformation that occurs when words or utterances move between self and other, between social dialects, languages, or even cultures. Foreign determinations are no longer accepted wholesale, but enter into a dialogic process of reciprocal negotiation with the own language. Bakhtin states that any meaning, culture or subject changes in the encounter with other, foreign meanings, cultures or subjects:

A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which

surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. (1986a, p. 7).

The dialogic encounter opens both self and other up to the new and implies a notion of translation not as a relation of equivalence or sameness, but as an incessant movement of reciprocal transformation.

Even in Bakhtin's early work the other's evaluations of the self do not always enter the self as consolidated wholes. In his early philosophical text "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" there already appears a component of creative appropriation or domestication: the other's determinations "are rendered completely immanent to our own consciousness, are *translated*, as it were, into its language" (p. 16). Although the other's input is crucial to becoming a fully-defined, self-conscious subject, the other's words cannot be incorporated whole, as a permanently foreign body. If this happens, Bakhtin cautions, the other's determinations will "begin to act as 'dead points', as obstructions of any accomplishment" (p. 16). To function productively, the other's words need to be made immanent to the self, rendered familiar.

At the same time, the other's words always introduce something new, something that cannot be fully assimilated. As Bakhtin sees it, "in the act of understanding, a struggle occurs that results in mutual change and enrichment" (1986b, p. 141). If we read "understanding" as "translation", what we have here is a conception of translation as the struggle between the original text (the other's utterance) and the self's interpretation of this text, where neither wins out completely and each to some extent changes the other. The self transforms the other's words, but at the same time the other's words transform the self.

At one point, Bakhtin explicitly rejects translation as a metaphor for the workings of dialogic understanding:

One cannot understand understanding as emotional empathy (*Einfühlung*), as the placement of the self in the other's position (loss of one's own position). This is required only for peripheral aspects of understanding. One cannot understand understanding as a translation from the other's language into one's own language. (1986b, p. 141).

What he rejects, however, is not translation as such, but the traditional understanding of translation as faithful reproduction, as putting yourself completely in the other's place. Dialogic understanding entails an active transformation and response that makes the other's words mine without

completely obliterating their foreignness, their origin outside myself. There can be no response if this outsideness is forgotten.

The reverse danger of translation, for Bakhtin, lies in letting yourself be engulfed by the foreign text without referring it to your own language. Walter Benjamin, in his seminal text "The Task of the Translator", identifies this hazard in his discussion of Hölderlin. When the foreign tongue invades your own too deeply, when there is too much harmony between the two, meaning disappears and "the gates of a language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator with silence" (p. 82). Benjamin's shut gates are the equivalent of Bakhtin's "dead points" of understanding, where the other's determinations begin to act as obstructions to the self's development.

What should at all times be avoided, in Bakhtin's view, is the merging of self and other, of original and translation. Consequently, the simulacrum, as an indistinguishable copy interchangeable with the original, denotes the failure of dialogic intersubjectivity. The simulacrum produces, in the words of Jean Baudrillard, "perfect remakes" that correspond to themselves without referring to anything outside or truly other (p. 45). The culture of the simulacrum is one of self-plagiarism, where images and words circulate "in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (p. 6). The simulacrum internalizes its own repetition, so that there is no longer any outward movement:

That discourse "circulates" is to be taken literally: that is, it no longer goes from one point to another, but it traverses a cycle that *without distinction* includes the positions of transmitter and receiver, now unlocatable as such. (p.41, n7).

Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum implies a complete lack of distance and difference, a "move towards translatability" (p. 87) that cancels out alterity and removes the capacity for intersubjective mediation. Self and other, transmitter and receiver, merge to the point of erasure. Understood in this way, the simulacrum marks an infinitely circular self-translation where all reference to the other's original exterior determining words is lost. Bakhtin would reject this notion of the simulacrum as anti-dialogic, because it forecloses the openness to difference and becoming he views as essential to intersubjectivity.

There is, however, a different interpretation of the simulacrum that Bakhtin's theory of translation would accommodate. In *Phantom Communities: The Simulacrum and the Limits of Postmodernism*, Scott Durham out-

lines the simulacrum in its "daemonic sense" where it comes to signify "the positive expression of metamorphic and creative 'powers of the false'" (p. 8). In this form, the simulacrum hails the return of difference, is associated with appropriation, transformation, the non-synchronous, and with a becoming other than itself. Here, the appearance of sameness is exploited to introduce difference in a manner that remains faithful to Bakhtin's notion that even a completely accurate quotation of someone else's words will ultimately not have the same meaning, because of the inevitable spatio-temporal shift between the two events and subjects of utterance.

Fundamentally, Bakhtinian dialogism conceptualizes translation as a two-way process of re-interpretation through re-contextualization. Each new context brings new meaning to the word, so that words cannot move between self and other without undergoing change. At the same time the word never forgets its previous contexts, its previous translations, so that the transformation is never complete: "The speech of another, once enclosed in a context, is — no matter how accurately transmitted — always subject to certain semantic changes" (Bakhtin, 1996, p. 340).

Along these lines, Bakhtin anticipates more recent theories of translation as producing an inevitable excess or remainder. Most pertinently, in his article "Translation, Philosophy, Materialism", Lawrence Venuti has distinguished two forms of remainder: a domestic remainder, which denotes the domestic inscriptions that serve to render the foreign text understandable in its new context; and a foreign remainder, which refers to the foreign elements retained from the original text that mark the translation as a translation.

The Bakhtinian subject can be seen as containing both a domestic and a foreign remainder: to a degree, it domesticates the other's evaluations, but at the same time it retains elements of their otherness. The latter preclude the self from ever coinciding with itself and ensure the subject's status as a task-to-be-accomplished rather than a given. Bakhtin's subject-as-translator continually remakes itself by way of the other, never coinciding either with the other or with itself as an original, but translating and re-translating itself until death. Bakhtin is concerned with words and subjects not as original essences, but as recycled, reiterated, quoted, translated and translating constructions that are never fixed, but always still becoming. There are no origins, only compositions of quotations, tapestries of translations suspended in a zone of negotiation between self and other. The most productive form of discourse, characteristically, is not the self's or the other's, but a mix of the two: an utterance half-ours and half-someone else's. A semi-translation.

## Laplanche: non-translation

Laplanche's psychoanalytic theory of the subject contains a more explicit theory of translation. Against Freud's hermeneutical model, where the depths of the unconscious are decoded in an act of instant deciphering, Laplanche proposes a continuing effort of translation, de-translation and re-translation. This effort is never completely successful because certain elements resist translation altogether. Against Bakhtin's semi-translator, Laplanche's subject emerges as a forever failing translator, who nevertheless compulsively persists in his efforts.

What the subject translates is, first of all, the message from the other: "In order for there to be translation, someone must have meant something" (Laplanche 1999, p. 157). Like Bakhtin, Laplanche focuses attention on the role of the empirical other in the constitution of the subject: "The theory of seduction affirms the priority of the other in the constitution of the human being and of its sexuality. Not the Lacanian other, but the concrete other: the adult facing the child" (1999, p. 212). He speaks of the "priority of the other" (1999, p. 209) and views the other's intersubjective address as the prototype of meaningful subjectivity and origin of all notions the subject will have of itself, including her ego and her unconscious:

There is no interrogation of the human condition which is not propelled by the message of the other. The great fundamental questions — where do we come from? Where are we bound? What does gender mean? etc. — only reach the individual as questions posed by the other. (1996, p. 11).

The most influential messages arrive when the self is a baby without unconscious, situated in a pre-subjective state similar to the "dark chaos" evoked by Bakhtin.

These first messages effect the baby's primal seduction, which Laplanche conceptualizes not as actual sexual abuse or fantasy, but as "a fundamental human situation" (Stanton, p. 9). Seduction (always traumatic) is inherent to the child's first contact with its adult carers. These adults approach the child with words, gestures and affects of which the child can only partly make sense. Although the child is initially passive in the face of the incoming messages, it quickly takes on an active role, attempting to translate them into an intelligible language. Because it lacks the appropriate tools of signification, this effort is always only partially successful and leaves

a remainder, which comes to form the inner foreign body of the unconscious. If the other's message is the to-be-translated, then the unconscious is the has-not-been-translated, the repressed part of the message that could not be made sense of. The unconscious, in other words, composes itself out of Venuti's foreign remainder.

Whereas Bakhtin generally considers the other's words readily understandable and translatable, Laplanche views the other's messages as doubly enigmatic. The child does not possess the linguistic tools to adequately translate the message, but at the same time, because of the interference of the adult's unconscious, even the adult himself does not fully grasp its meaning. The other's message contains elements that are of themselves resistant to translation, that were not digested by the other and, consequently, can also not be digested by the self. Hence, for Laplanche "dead points" cannot be avoided, but are inherent to messages sent between subjects who do not possess a full translation of themselves.

By placing translation partly outside the subject's control, Laplanche complicates Bakhtin's scenario, where the subject appears able to decide what to translate and what to leave intact. Although translation is facilitated by the existence of common interpretative codes, it is at the same time complicated by necessary failure: "translation is always at the same time a failure of translation — that is, repression, the constitution of the unconscious from what translation deposits as waste" (Laplanche, 1996, p. 11). It is not the subject who separates the valuable from the waste, but the process of translation and signification itself. This introduces a break between self and other, where the realm of language (the symbolic) intervenes in their interaction: "With the concept of enigma, a break in determinism appears" (1999, p. 160). Although Bakhtin conjures up the untranslatable in his notion of authoritative discourse, the untranslatability of this discourse is related not to the unconscious or linguistic structures, but to social power relations.<sup>1</sup>

For Laplanche there is either full translation or no translation at all: the self makes full sense of part of the message, while the rest is internalised whole. Laplanche's unconscious thus takes the shape of what Bakhtin would see as a giant "dead point" or obstruction, which interferes between the self and its self-consciousness. Whereas Bakhtin conceptu-

<sup>1</sup> In "Discourse in the Novel", Bakhtin defines authoritative speech as the "word of the fathers" which "enters our verbal consciousness a compact and indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it" (p. 343). He likens authoritative speech to a taboo, "a name that must not be taken in vain" (p. 343) and argues that "authoritative discourse cannot be represented — it is only transmitted" (p. 344). Because its transmission is always whole, authoritative speech excludes translation.

alises translation as an openness to the other that is never closed off into either complete transformation or intact incorporation, Laplanche has no place for semi-translation or a mutual mixing of words. He finally envisions translation as a movement of closure: the path to the other is cut off as soon as the message is received and from that moment onwards, translation operates as an internal, self-centred process:

All development takes place, therefore, in the direction of a double closure to the message of the other. The closure on the side of what can be translated, theorised, in other words, more or less given ideological form; and also closure through the sealing-off, the repression of the anamorphic residue of messages, that is, of what resists symbolisation. (1999, p. 229).

Translation is undertaken at the service of the self, not of the other and there is no movement of return, no feedback. Paradoxically, Laplanche's move towards untranslatability replicates the circularity and self-enclosure of Baudrillard's simulacrum and its move towards translatability. Both extremes effect an exclusion or erasure of the other from the intersubjective relation.

Laplanche's double closure to the other's continued existence indicates a fundamental lack of responsiveness. Bakhtin and the other members of the Bakhtin circle view the response as the primary goal of translation. In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, V. N. Voloshinov notes how "any act of understanding is a response, i.e. it translates what is being understood into a new context from which a response can be made" (p. 69, n2). Translation does not end in the self, but is returned to the other. Only when it is responsive in this manner can it be truly dialogic. The Bakhtinian subject translates the other's words and reacts to them, so that translation serves not only the self, but also the other.

This accords with Jacques Derrida's theory of translation, which invests translation with a supplementary effect on the original text. The translation completes, complements and adds to the original, fulfilling a debt to it:

Translation augments and modifies the original, which, insofar as it is living on, never ceases to be transformed and to grow. It modifies the original even as it also modifies the translating language. (1985a, p. 122).

In terms of intersubjectivity, this would mean that it is not just the self who is changed by the encounter, but also the other. Translation between two

languages or subjects appears, in Derrida's words, as a "'sur-vival' that changes them both" (1985b, p. 191). Laplanche's view of translation as a closure that takes place in the self and for the self ignores the inevitable transformation of the other in a process of translation that is not singular, but ongoing.

In this regard, it is significant that both Bakhtin and Laplanche see the self's negotiation with the other's word as a lifelong process, not one that stops after the first intersubjective address. Laplanche's subject engages in "continual 'self-theorisation'" (1999, p. 101), expressed as a process of de-translation/re-translation prompted by the other, but again essentially situated in the self. Laplanche argues that adults will usually simply "rehash" old translations (1999, p. 161). Only if confronted with a novel, shocking situation is a more productive, more comprehensive re-translation prompted.

For Laplanche, primal seduction is most commonly repeated in mourning, in art and in analysis. These situations, unlike the original address, do not involve living, active others with whom the self engages face to face. In mourning, the other is dead; in art, the other is only indirectly involved in the creative process; and in analysis, the psychoanalyst listens more than he speaks. To safeguard the priority of the empirical other and prevent Laplanche's scenario of translation from remaining confined to the self, I would like to argue that *all* intersubjective encounters where the other is an active partner in dialogue or negotiation, have the potential to trigger de-translation/re-translation in the self, either on a conscious or unconscious level.

In addition, Laplanche's work would benefit from a notion of reciprocity, as found in Bakhtin's idea that both sender and receiver are transformed or translated by truly dialogic encounters. Laplanche rejects the possibility of a two-sided enigma, arguing that "seduction is an asymmetrical relationship, whose prototype is furnished by the infant-adult couple" (1992, p. 175). Since the infant does not yet have an unconscious, it cannot send enigmatic messages to the adult. However, if the infant begins translating from the moment of the first address, it must be able to begin sending enigmas into the world soon afterwards. Moreover, the adult's interaction with the child — childbirth being an exemplary situation of the sudden appearance of the other — is sure to incite a self-translation in the adult. What Laplanche disregards is the way the parent-child relationship, and most other intersubjective relations, are not one-sided but exist as an *exchange* of messages, a movement of message and response, question and answer.

In Laplanche's theory translation works one way only and is never returned to sender. In contrast, Bakhtin sees translation as a "critical interanimation" (1996, p. 296) that transforms both languages or subjects involved. If we introduce Laplanche's enigmatic address to reciprocity, there would still be un-translated remainders on both sides. Neither party would ever achieve a full translation, but the process of back-and-forth, of continued negotiation, would enable follow-up questions to be asked and would thus open up a space for mutual clarification, the exchange of additional information, and perhaps a reduction of the remainder. A dialogic process of translation may yield different, perhaps more productive results than the essentially solitary effort Laplanche delineates.

A final benefit of a reciprocal theory of translation is its temporality. Laplanche sees the encounter with the other effecting a retranslation of the past, of what is already there: it is "interpretation in terms of the past (infantile, archaic)" (1992, p. 170). Its temporality is that of *Nachträglichkeit*. If translation were seen as a mutual process, involving not only messages but also answers, its temporality would be propelled into the future. Translation would entail a new attitude not only towards the past, but also towards the present and, in a move of anticipatory re-translation, the possible future.

Like Laplanche, Bakhtin does not conceive of the subject as formed once and for all by the other's initial address. The first address merely creates a first posture, a preliminary shape over which the self will gain more and more control as he begins to develop his own discourse out of the words a multitude of others speak about and towards him: "One's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse" (1996, p. 348). The shift from passivity to activity produces control, choice and autonomy. The subject emerges when it learns to speak its own independent language: "An independent, responsible and active discourse is *the* fundamental indicator of an ethical, legal and political human being" (1996, p. 350).

However, such independence is never absolute. The monologization of consciousness — the consolidation of external voices into the self's own voice — is only a provisional translation, only momentarily satisfactory. It is a stopping point that enables the self to act, but it is never definitive and may at any moment be triggered into a renewed dialogism by a fresh encounter with another voice: "This monologized consciousness enters as a single whole into a new dialogue (with the new external voices of others)"

(1986c, p. 163). Bakhtin thus intimates a similar process of de-translation/re-translation to Laplanche. For both theorists, it is only in a continual effort of self-translation that the subject exists and has a future. However, for Bakhtin this effort always proceeds by way of the empirical, external, living other, effecting this other through the essential responsiveness of translation, the way translation always returns to the original to change it. As Derrida notes, "it is never the same text, never an echo, that comes back to you" (1985a, p. 158). And if the answer does not replicate the question that means it poses questions to the original, to which the original is then obliged to react. For Laplanche's account of non-translation, this would mean that the enigma is also returned to sender. Rather than being closed off, it would remain in circulation and this circulation would inevitably introduce it to change.

## Conclusion

I have shown how Bakhtin and Laplanche share a focus on the importance of the living other for the formation and reformation of the subject, how both theorists turn the subject into a translator, and how each conceptualizes translation as transformation. Laplanche's theory works to complicate Bakhtin's initial intersubjective encounter by introducing the enigma as that non-transparent part of the message whose translation is doomed to failure. Paradoxically, it is this failure, this non-translation, that keeps the need for the external other alive, as only this other can prompt a renewed effort of de-translation/re-translation, sustaining the subject in the necessary but illusory belief that one day she will be able to understand everything about herself and the other. In turn, Bakhtin supplements Laplanche's theory through the element of reciprocity, which substitutes openness for closure and interaction for one-sidedness. Neither translation nor non-translation functions as a one-way street. Rather, they appear as a series of intersections, where messages and answers, successes and failures cross paths and are exchanged. The other does not simply disappear from the stage after sending his message, but solicits an answer, however inadequate. This process, which bears on the past as well as the future, is potentially infinite and ensures that the subject remains in translation for as long as it lives.

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