

Translation, Cultural Translation and the Hegemonic English

By Roman Horak

Abstract

This brief chapter problematizes the hegemonic position of the English language in Cultural Studies, which, in the author's view, can be understood as a moment that stands against a true internationalisation of the project. Following an argument referring to the necessary 'translation' process (here seen as 're-articulation', 'transcoding' or 'transculturation') Stuart Hall has put forward almost two decades ago, the essay, firstly, turns to the notion of 'linguistic translations', and deals, secondly, with what has been coined 'cultural translation'. Discussing approaches developed by Walter Benjamin, Umberto Eco and Homi Bhabha, the complex relationship between the two terms is being investigated.

Finally, in a modest attempt to throw some light on this hegemonic structure, central aspects of the output of three important journals (European Journal of Cultural Studies, International Journal of Cultural Studies, Cultural Studies), i. e. an analysis of the linguistic and institutional backgrounds of the authors of the ten most-read and most-cited essays, are presented.

Based on these findings I argue that it is not simply the addition of the *discursive field* (language) to the *academic space* (institution) that defines the mechanism of exclusion and inclusion. Rather, it is the *articulation of both moments*, i.e. that of language and that of the institution, which – in various contexts (but in their own very definite ways) – can help to develop that structure which at present is still hindering a further, more profound internationalisation of the project that is Cultural Studies.

Keywords: Scholarly publishing, translation, hegemonic English, Cultural Studies

Translation, Cultural Translation and the Hegemonic English

Almost twenty years ago, more precisely in the summer of 1996, Handel K. Wright gave a sensational keynote lecture as part of the first Crossroads in Cultural Studies Conference. Written in a style that was ironic, yet at the same time astutely provocative, the lecture – which was published one and a half years later, in the first issue of the newly founded *European Journal of Cultural Studies* – challenged the universally shared assumption that the origins of cultural studies lay in Great Britain, and more precisely at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. Wright claimed that there were other ‘origins’, supporting his claim with reference to various comparable projects in Denmark in the 1920s, North America in the 1930s and Kenya in the 1970s. Although the list might also be extended to include, for example, the movement propagating working-class culture and education in Vienna in the inter-war years, Handel Wright’s argument has both its charms and a serious hidden agenda, yet should not be misunderstood as a carping attempt to disparage the work of the founding generation of British Cultural Studies. As far as Wright was concerned, the aim of his lecture/text was to help augment the international orientation of the Cultural Studies project. Employing the ruse of re-writing traditional history, he was endeavouring to facilitate a broader, more international future for the project, and to maintain the momentum of its progressive and interdisciplinary orientation.

Wright, who was employed at the University of Tennessee at the time when he published the paper in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, rightly criticised the Anglocentrism of Cultural Studies. Making reference to the work of Kuan-Hsing Chen, among others, he proposed, as an alternative, a departure from both Anglocentrism and Eurocentrism (Wright 1998: 48).

From the perspective of the tradition of the work of the CCCS, at the latest since the 1980s (I need mention only the names of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy), this is a thoroughly praiseworthy approach. I allow myself to add that an internationalisation of Cultural Studies (however we may evaluate it) has indeed occurred, at least rudimentarily, over the past two decades, and I cite here its developments in South America and Asia as a paradigm.

What Wright did not challenge, despite all his discussion of the limitations of Anglocentric and Eurocentric politico-cultural dominance, was the linguistic hegemony of English. The fact that this linguistic hegemony is accompanied by a rather hermetic discursive field is hereby only mentioned at this point, although I shall return to the topic later.

The same year (1996) that Handel Wright delivered his stunning lecture also saw the publication of a volume of essays edited by David Morley and Kuan-

Hsing Chen, entitled *Stuart Hall. Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, which contained the reprint of an interview with Stuart Hall which had been conducted by Chen on the occasion of the Trajectories Conference (organised by the Institute of Literature at the National Tsing Hua University in Taipei, Taiwan) in July 1992. This conference is remarkable insofar as it was the first international Cultural Studies conference to be held outside the English-speaking world.

The interview was entitled 'Cultural Studies and the Politics of Internationalization' and, like Handel Wright's lecture, it dealt with questions about the future orientation and direction of the Cultural Studies project. More so than in the case of Wright, the focus was on the politics of Cultural Studies, with hegemony a central notion and the spirit of Antonio Gramsci (at least in English translation) hanging in air.

Hall dismisses considerations and questions about the 'origins' of Cultural Studies as unproductive – a point, incidentally, in which his argumentation resembles that of Handel Wright. His response to a question concerning the relevance of British Cultural Studies was that it would be much more important to observe the changes that it was undergoing. Its approaches, paradigms and research topics had changed since the 1960s, and although what characterised it now (1992) could be viewed in relation to the earlier work, present-day practice occupied a different space, which did not, however, mean that all ties had been severed. British Cultural Studies was at any rate needed if it produced good work (Hall 1996: 394).

The early 1990s saw the expansion of Cultural Studies, above all in the United States (where one might almost describe it as having become an academic fashion at that time), but also in northern Europe and Asia. In the interview there is talk of an internationalisation and even a globalisation of the project. According to Hall, work in Cultural Studies was being done in many countries. However, this was not occurring as a process of simple, unchallenged acceptance (*appropriation/imitation*), but rather a process where practitioners everywhere adopting a certain paradigm and transforming it in their own way according to their own respective interests. In order to describe the process, Hall makes use of the term 'translation', which he elucidates as follows.

The term, according to Hall, should naturally not be understood in a narrowly traditionalist way, but resembles the terms 're-articulation', 'transcoding' or 'transculturation', which are also used in other contexts in Cultural Studies. The term 'translation' ought not to be understood as if there were an original, the translation of which would then be a copy of the former. Such an understanding, Hall argues, derives from a time when people still adhered to a notion of teleology that has become redundant today. Hall makes reference to the notion of 'identity', which comes from teleological discourse, but which is not used in the same way by him, making it necessary to place the term 'identity' in inverted commas.

And I use ‘translation’ in quotation marks too: translation as a continuous process of re-articulation and re-contextualization, without any notion of a primary origin. So I am not using it in the sense that cultural studies was ‘really’ a fully-formed western project and is now taken up elsewhere. I mean that whenever it enters a new cultural space, the terms change; and, exactly as you find in any re-articulation and disarticulation, some elements remain the same, because clearly there are certain points, certain terms and concepts in common, but there are also new elements which change the configuration. (Hall 1996: 393 f.)

Let us now examine this central term in Hall’s argumentation, that of ‘translation’, by taking a step back. Modern translation science distinguishes between ‘translation between languages’ and ‘translation between cultures’. The latter – which is the one that concerns Hall – involves a metaphorical extension of the classical term ‘translation’.

For our purposes, both variants are significant, even if in the case of ‘translation between languages’ it is usually literary translation that is intended and theorised about, whereas in our everyday Cultural Studies practice we deal with academic texts.

There is not room here for a detailed debate on the complex issues of translation. A few points, however, shall be raised in order to be able to elaborate on the main topic of this essay, that is, the structures of inclusion/exclusion and the hegemonic English within the transdisciplinary practice of Cultural Studies.

Umberto Eco, referring to ‘translation proper’, discusses translation as negotiation. This negotiation involves a number of parties. Eco mentions the original text, an author, the cultural frame within the text is situated, on the other side there is the destination text, the cultural milieu in which the text is being translated, the publishing industry. The translator is then the negotiator between the parties involved.

In Eco’s words: “Negotiation is a process by virtue of which, in order to get something, each party renounces something else, and at the end everybody feels satisfied since one cannot have everything” (Eco 2004: 6. See also Eco 2008, 2009).

In relation to literary translation, Walter Benjamin speaks of a ‘task’. In the kind of literary translation with which he is concerned “the life of the originals attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding” (Benjamin 1996: 255), and this effectively helps to keep the text alive. Since Benjamin proceeds from the assumption that a translation always comes later, there is a temporal distance between the composition of the initial text and its translation, so that the translation may be not only between languages but also between epochs. If it is true, as Benjamin thought, that all languages intend the same, yet in their imperfection can only approximate an ideal (pure) language which they are actually unable to attain, then this fact has serious consequences for translation.

For him, the focal point is not the question of how to achieve the greatest possible faithfulness in translation, or of the freedom of the translator, but rather the

fact that a moment of pure language becomes reality in the process of translation. Benjamin's concept of language creation has exerted a considerable influence on recent translation theory, of which I refer here solely to Homi Bhabha's notion of cultural translation.

Whereby we have already arrived at the second notion. As Birgit Wagner, the Viennese scholar of Romance Studies, has pointed out (correctly, in my opinion), the term 'cultural translation' is a metaphorical extension of the notion of translation. In one essay, which deals with Homi Bhabha's reflections on the subject, she writes:

If 'translation' generally denotes the process of casting a text from one natural language into another, then cultural 'translation' looks away from language – and above all from the differences between languages – and usually signifies the translation of the ideas, values, patterns of thinking, patterns of behaviour and practices of one cultural context into that of another. Cultural translation in this sense may be achieved through literary and cinematic representation, but also through the practices of everyday life and politics. (Wagner 2009: 1)

We are now able to ask what this entails for the world of academic disciplines. Literal translation is a matter for translation science, which in recent times has also undergone a process of reform. Within this discipline it is Translational Studies (Cf. Bassnett 1998, 2002, Venuti 2000) – inspired and informed by the debates of Post-Colonialism and Gender Studies – which has come closest to a more comprehensive notion of translation, "yet it too still remains attached to definite achievements in translation and to concrete languages, and in so doing circles within the orbit of the textual sciences." (Wagner, *loc. cit.*)

However, in metaphorical use, it is not so clear where the term belongs academically. To quote Birgit Wagner again:

On the other hand, the metaphorical extension of the notion of translation is the responsibility of every concrete specialist discipline, and eventually of none at all: the term serves as a perfect example of a transdisciplinary challenge, and frequently also of a transdisciplinary challenge whose demands are excessive. (Wagner *loc. cit.*)

Against this background, it is neither a coincidence nor surprising that Stuart Hall, a leading representative of the transdisciplinary subject of Cultural Studies, makes use of this metaphorically broad term of 'translation' when it is a matter of propagating and reforming of the field of Cultural Studies, as we have seen above.

Both of the notions of translation are of central significance to the task of internationalising and globalising the practice of Cultural Studies; and we will have to ask ourselves how the problematics of translation (in both of its senses) contribute to the development of structures of exclusion and/or inclusion. In other words, following a dictum of Marx, we shall now ascend from the abstract to the concrete.

Let us therefore enter the empirical-factual world and begin with the rather banal statement that English is the dominant world language at present (and has been for some considerable time now), illustrated by the circumstance that more

texts are translated from the English language than into it (and this applies above all to literature). I would here dare to remark that talk of Eurocentrism – though it is politically important – tends to obfuscate rather than illuminate this circumstance, because use of the term ‘Eurocentrism’ only serves to conceal the dominance of the English language behind a cloak of invisibility. This should not be misunderstood as the maudlin complaint of an author with German as his mother-tongue. On the one hand, the present author is anglophile to a high degree, while on the other hand it is not a good thing for English to be playing this role of *lingua franca*. This may be illustrated by a small example from my academic practice. For well over a decade now, I have worked for the European Commission as an evaluator of research applications. In accordance with the logic of the bureaucratic-centralistic administration of knowledge, not only are the exposés presented in English, but the critical evaluators’ reports also have to be composed in a peculiarly created and bureaucratically standardised English, which has little in common with the living language of literature, science or everyday life. *BrunGLISH* (i.e. Brussels’ English) is an ironic expression for it, and in this context BrunGLISH trumps English every time, as a Scottish colleague painfully experienced when his Final Report had to be corrected from pure English to BrunGLISH by his vice-chair (the person who has to supervise a certain number of evaluators and monitor the reports’ final linguistic form). The casualness with which the said colleague accepted this act of linguistic vandalism still astonishes me even today.

In such situations one feels transported back to the Middle Ages, or to early modern times, to a time when it was Latin, as the international language, that made communication possible, above all among the elites. However this comparison is somewhat flawed, since Latin is (and was at that time) a language which, although it constituted a cultural space, cannot be allocated to any particular geographico-physical space (nor could it be at that time).

It is a quite different matter with English. English is the language of the only political world power remaining since the collapse of so-called real Socialism almost a quarter of a century ago. If we recall the debate about economic multi-centrality – following Asia’s economic boom (now also already in decline) – we can see that the political (and cultural hegemony) of English continues.

Without pandering to the simple argument about the Americanisation of culture, it must be stated that the said linguistic dominance – which is the only thing that we are dealing with here – also has consequences that cannot be overlooked for the sciences, although the consequences may be less serious for the formal-abstract/abstracting natural sciences, than for the humanities and social sciences, for which the work on the text represents an important moment in the production of knowledge.

In this connection, if the humanities and social sciences, and in particular the transdisciplinary discipline and political practice of the Cultural Studies project, seek to be understood internationally, then questions naturally begin to arise about

the process of inclusion and exclusion already mentioned above. In my opinion, it is no coincidence that these questions have hardly been addressed at all.

A rapid and unsystematic glance at the great majority of current (and recent) publications in the broad field of Cultural Studies suffices to illustrate the scope of the problem. What we find there in the respective references are – with the exception of articles by celebrated international stars – almost exclusively texts by English-language authors, or by those who teach and carry out research at universities in the English-speaking world.

I would now like to flesh out this preliminary finding – which is actually only an initial and, please note, unsystematic observation – more empirically, with the request that what follows should not be misunderstood as a strict or methodically comprehensive investigation. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that ‘something is coming into view’ here – to borrow the words of the great recently deceased filmmaker Harun Farocki.

In order, therefore, to bring some light to the darkness, I picked up three of the most important internationally oriented Cultural Studies magazines, and skimmed through the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* and *Cultural Studies*.

On the homepages of all three journals a service is offered which not only flatters the vanity of the authors concerned, but which is also very useful for our present purposes, namely a listing of the most-cited and most-read articles, available for any particular sampling date. Despite the fact that I am not quite sure how the administrators obtained this information about the said articles, that is, about who has really read which (most-read) essay, a glance at these lists produces some very interesting insights.

I examined the ten most frequently mentioned texts, firstly from the perspective of the author’s mother-tongue and then with regard to his or her academic location, i.e. the university or other institution at which they were working.

I started with the mother-tongue/ native language aspect: the first publication to be examined was the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. In the category of most-cited articles, the top 10 articles (sampling date: September 2014) were written by a total of 17 authors, of whom only 4 did not have English as their mother-tongue (one was a native Turkish speaker, one was Belgian and two had Dutch as their mother-tongue). As far as the category of most-read essays was concerned, there were 14 authors, and once again there were only 4 who were not English native-speakers (all them were Dutch).

Turning to the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (sampling date: September 2014), we find that the most-cited articles were written by 11 different authors, of whom 3 were not English native-speakers (one was Greek and two were Dutch). The ten most-read articles were written by 13 authors, 6 of whom evidently did not have English as their mother-tongue (being Spanish, Korean, Singaporean, Greek, Dutch and Belgian).

Lastly, I turned my attention to the oldest and probably also most influential journal, *Cultural Studies*. Here the results obtained (sampling date: 28 October 2014) were as follows: of the top 10 most-cited articles (which were written by 13 different authors), only 2 were written by non-English-language authors (both of them from South America, with Spanish as their mother-tongue). Among the most-read essays, a still more unequivocal picture emerges: they were written by 11 authors, only one of whom was not a native-speaker of English (Spanish).

To sum up: the 60 articles examined (including overlaps, a number of articles appeared both among most read and most cited) were written by 64 authors (considering overlaps between most read and most cited articles) of whom 18 did not have English as their mother-tongue. This is not a strictly empirical finding, yet the picture that emerges is clear, more than 70% are English native speakers.

In my opinion, what we have here is a *discursive field* which produces structures of inclusion/exclusion. Within the logic of western and European dominance, they prolong the anglophile orientation and thereby the continuing hegemony of the Anglo-American character of the Cultural Studies project. To express it more concisely: anyone who has English as their mother-tongue is in, anyone who does not is out.

A glance at the institutional locations of those authors who wrote the 60 essays that were examined should help to support my argument and at the same time sharpen the focus of discussion. First of all, returning to the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, we find that of the 10 most-cited articles, only one single essay had authors (dual authors) from an academic workplace that does not lie in an English-speaking country. They work, respectively, at the University of Amsterdam and at the University of Brussels. In the case of the 10 most-read essays there were two authors who worked elsewhere, namely at the University of Amsterdam and at CEMRI Universidade Aberta, Lisbon. In the case of the *International Journal for Cultural Studies*, the following picture emerges: all the most-cited articles were written by authors who are teaching at an English-language university, with one author also recording an additional affiliation with the University of Athens (Greece). As far as the most-read articles were concerned, there was one essay, composed by two authors, who work at the Singapore University of Technology and Design (where English is an official language together with Malay, Mandarin and Tamil) and at the Shungshin Women's University in Korea, respectively. The rest of the authors are employed in the Anglo-American countries.

As far as *Cultural Studies* is concerned, everything is very clear. All the authors – of both the most-cited and the most-read articles – work at English-language universities. A synopsis likewise gives an unequivocal result. Of all the 64 authors mentioned there are solely 7 (among whom I include a colleague who records her affiliation not only with Lancaster University, but also with the University of Athens) who are not working at an academic institution in an English-speaking country.

I do not wish to overvalue these results of a minimal random sampling, still less is it my intention to attribute them to the policies of the respective editors. That would be more than unfair, because they are of course making every effort to open up the Cultural Studies project internationally. After all, the magazine *Cultural Studies* has devoted special issues to e.g. the status of Cultural Studies in the Nordic countries, or in German-speaking countries, among other things. The *European Journal for Cultural Studies* also makes it possible, for instance, for colleagues who are not working at a university in America, Britain, Canada, Australia etc., to design themed issues of the journal.

However, faced by the unequivocal nature of the facts, it should be stated that – as we mentioned earlier – there are unequivocal mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion at work here.

On the one hand, it is a linguistic moment. The dominance of authors whose first language is English has created a *discursive field*, and as we have shown it has become rather difficult for those who are non-native English-speakers to enter that field, or even to contribute to its development. Language evidently still has great power here, including that of including some and excluding others. As far as language is concerned, Cultural Studies continues to be a very English discipline.

On the other hand, the institutional dimension also plays a formatively influential role here. It defines, more so even than knowledge of the English language (as a mother-tongue), what is adjudged to constitute Cultural Studies internationally. The *institutional* and *academic field* is dominated by Anglo-American universities, is hegemonially effective and moreover, as an essentially closed space, it is constantly reinforcing and perpetuating itself.

One might argue that the very presence of Cultural Studies representatives at Anglo-American universities provides the project with ‘outside’ stimuli and the potential for expansion. That may well be the case, except that, firstly, not everybody is able to migrate to the USA, to England, Australia or Canada etc., even if only temporarily; and secondly, such a perspective demonstrates a certain disdain for the necessity of a textual, institutional, linguistic etc proximity to the respective subject of research, a moment which, in my opinion, is of fundamental significance in Cultural Studies.

I would like to finish by summarising my argumentation and presenting my conclusion. It is not simply the addition of the *discursive field* (language) to the *academic space* (institution) that defines the mechanism of exclusion and inclusion, which has been the subject under consideration here. Rather, it is the articulation of both moments, i.e. that of language and that of the institution, which – in various contexts (but in their own very definite ways) – can help to develop that structure which at present is still hindering a further, more profound internationalisation of the project that is Cultural Studies.

The ‘translation process’ of Cultural Studies, the necessity of which was stated by Stuart Hall more than two decades ago, is certainly occurring, and I would

even dare to claim that it is growing. The aforementioned examples of editorial activity by the journals examined above point in this direction, as does that of *Culture Unbound*, the journal whose 6-year existence we are rightly celebrating here, and these have made a great contribution to a real internationalisation of our project.

Finally, one ought not to forget the Movements project and the journal *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* which is associated with it. What is taking pace there is indeed “a transborder collective undertaking to confront Inter-Asia cultural politics” (Editorial statement 2014: 171), accompanied by a very effective special formation of Cultural Studies.

Nonetheless, all this should not make us overlook those powers and structures, briefly outlined by me here, which are hindering and counteracting the further international development of Cultural Studies. Linguistic translation, as well as cultural translation, is indeed occurring, yet both of them come up against their limitations where the Anglo-American hegemonial structure becomes most influential.

Raymond Williams once said that Cultural Studies should be “one project and many formations”. Let us allow the project to grow, and render as many formations as possible visible.

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