3 May 2013: On Translation IV: Babel

From Céline Sabiron

Our corpus dealing with various theories of translation was quite extensive this week since we looked at a few materials all gathered together around the Babel theme: Jacques Derrida’s ‘Les Tours de Babel’, and George Steiner’s After Babel – part 3 of ‘Understanding as Translation’. These texts were looked at with the first part of Matthew Reynolds’s monograph entitled The Poetry of Translation (part I, ‘Translation and Metaphor’) in mind. We started the discussion by questioning the reference to Babel. As we all remembered it forms the focus of a story told in the Book of Genesis of the Bible. According to the story a united humanity of the generations following the Great Flood, speaking a single language and migrating from the east, came to the land of Shinar where they resolved to build a city with a tower “whose top may reach unto heaven, and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth”. We discussed the idea that the Babel myth was an anti-utopian myth (impossibility of speaking one single language across the world). This diversity of languages can be seen as stemming from a second Fall (when God came down and realised that these people had transgressed by building a very tall tower and giving a name to themselves). A link was drawn with the Pentecost episode, even though the latter is only temporary (in the 2nd Book of Acts): it is mentioned that many languages, at least five, were spoken as the Holy Ghost filled the people in the upper room, and visitors from out of town heard them speaking in tongues. As the scriptures state, each heard his own language being spoken, i.e., folks from all these places heard their native language spoken). Questions were raised about the English translation of Derrida’s text by Joseph F. Graham: we wondered how the pun “the war/ he war” (p 223) was originally written in French. The translation between one or even two languages creates a sense of distance and foreignness, as seen with the Derrida’s text.

When looking at Matthew Reynolds’s reference to the etymology of the word “translation”, most people in the group agreed that a translation provided a sort of equivalence rather than an act of “carrying across”. In some languages, the word translation is not used, they talk about “versionising” (in Arabic for instance). The translation provides an equivalence for the original source text, and it is also accompanied by a move from the unconscious to the conscious (another form of “carrying across”).

We went on to wonder if there was a middle ground between Steiner’s statement that everything is translation, and Matthew Reynolds’s assumption that everything is a metaphor. Is there a difference between translating in your own language (giving synonyms or changing an outdated word for a more modern one, from informal to formal language etc….can you translate Jane Austen’s text into man’s language since Steiner raises the gender issue) and translating into a different language, or even into two different languages. We all came to the conclusion that it was a different process altogether.

Trying to compare and contrast the texts under study we realised that Steiner was talking about both speech and writing, whereas Derrida and Reynolds were mostly focused on writing. We thought that the texts led us to have quite a circular discussion about translation. We all concluded that some new taxonomy would be useful instead of trying to systemise translation.