WHY DECONSTRUCT?

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The central idea of this paper is by no means novel. My criticism of deconstruction is based on an argument that has been previously used by a number of authors.[1] My object is to develop this argument a bit further.

When a theoretical concept currently in use is criticized and another is substituted for it, the original concept is shown to be no longer adequate to its original purpose and the advantages of the new concept are demonstrated. It is then proposed that, in the contexts that are relevant to the scholarly discourse in question, the new concept should replace the old, which may continue to be used in contexts of low theoretical relevance in everyday life. To criticize a concept does not necessarily mean to relegate it to the ash heap of history, but only to relativize it, to limit its usefulness to contexts that are not scientifically relevant.

One example will make my point clear. Let us suppose that a historian claims to be a follower of historical materialism. This implies, among other things, that he does not accept the theoretical assumptions of a historiography that sees history as essentially determined by the actions of great men, charismatic leaders who can change the course of events by the imposition of their personal will. To the historical materialist, it is the means of production of material life — economic factors — that are the driving force of history, not the acts of superior individuals. So even if in a casual private conversation our Marxist historian may attribute the victory of the Russian Revolution to the iron will of Comrade Lenin, we must expect him, when writing a serious text on the events of 1917, to make it plain that, in his view, the real causes of the Revolution are to be found in impersonal factors of an economic nature, not in the will of a leader. Otherwise we may accuse of him of failing to observe, in his actual practice as a historian, the theoretical principles he claims

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[1] See, for instance, Perlofff 1996:53-57, in which the author discusses Bourdieu's and Jameson's critiques of Derrida and she herself analyses the cases of Stanley Fish. In relation to Fish, see also Britto 1995a. In the field of translation theory in particular, one of the most persistent critics of deconstruction has been Anthony Pym — see, for instance, Pym 1995. For a more comprehensive critique of deconstructionist positions, see Nussbaum 1994.

to believe in.

In just the same way, when a translation theorist criticizes certain assumptions, branding them as "logocentric" and claiming to demonstrate that they are untenable, we must conclude that she excludes such assumptions from her theoretical writings.

Let us examine the essay "As questões teóricas da tradução e a desconstrução do logocentrismo: algumas reflexões" (included in Arrojo 1992) by Prof. Rosemary Arrojo, perhaps the best-known spokesperson for deconstruction in the area of translation theory in Brazil. The text begins with a long epigraph, in Portuguese, identified as a passage from Nietzche's *Human All-Too-Human*. In her article, Arrojo discusses a number of authors who have examined the problem of translation, such as George Steiner, W. V. Quine and Ronald Knox. She then (p. 74) sums up three of the assumptions of Knox's argumentation, which tries to reduce the theoretical issues of translation to two questions; these assumptions, Arrojo says, make up the basis of the "logocentric tradition" she criticizes. Slightly simplified for the purposes of the present discussion, the assumptions are:

(1) there can be such a thing as a "literal" translation — i.e., one that is equivalent to the "original," with no interference from the translator;

(2) an "original" text can be considered a stable object, the meaning of which may be identified with the author's conscious intention, and does not depend on the reader's own contribution or on the text's sociocultural and historical context;

(3) meaning is an object distinct from the style of the text in which it appears.

Then Arrojo quotes, in Portuguese, a number of passages from a work by the French author Georges Mounin, criticizing his notion of a scientific linguistics (a criticism to which, as we shall see, I wholeheartedly subscribe). After each quotation, the author makes such comments as "*Assim, para Mounin...*" ("thus, to Mounin…"), "*Mounin deixa claro...*" ("Mounin makes clear…"), or "*Mounin crê, portanto...*" ("Mounin believes, therefore…"). In her conclusion, Arrojo criticizes the "logocentric" tradition because it poses an obstacle to advancement in translation theory, and proposes the deconstruction of the three assumptions above. At the end of the article there is a short bibliography that, as usual, does not include Nietzsche's work, because it is used only for the epigraph, but does include

Mounin's work, in Portuguese. The name of the translator of Mounin's work is not mentioned.

The above summary is far from complete — Arrojo's article raises many specific issues that deserve a more detailed analysis — but for my present purposes it is quite sufficient. What can we conclude, on the basis of this summary?

First, that Arrojo assumes that the translation of a text may be considered equivalent to the original. For the passages by Nietzsche and Mounin she quotes were not written by Nietzsche or Mounin: they are taken from texts written in Portuguese by Brazilian translators. Or are the translators Portuguese rather than Brazilian? They might be, for all we know; Arrojo does not name them, clearly because she thinks this detail is irrelevant to her purposes. It is the meaning of the passages that she is interested in, the ideas that Nietzsche and Mounin express in their texts; and she believes that these meanings, or ideas, have been transposed into Portuguese in the translations she quotes from in a reasonably reliable way. By treating translations as if they were originals and attributing them to the authors of the originals, Arrojo is clearly assuming the logocentric notion summed up in (1) — translations are texts that are equivalent to their originals.

Second, we find that Arrojo uses such expressions as "Mounin believes" and "to Mounin." Now, if she can attribute beliefs and opinions to Mounin on the strength of her reading of Mounin's text, it must be because she agrees that Mounin's text reflects Mounin's conscious intentions. We also see that she quotes Nietzsche's passage in her epigraph but then makes no further mention of it in her article. This means that Arrojo considers that the meaning of the passage is completely expressed in the words themselves, it being unnecessary to make any additional comment on them, or to contextualize them with information on the larger text where it is taken from, or on the probable Brazilian readers her article is addressed to. That is, in her textual practice, Arrojo follows assumption (2): meaning is a stable property of a text, which can be identified with the author's conscious intention in writing it, and which does not depend on the reader's actual circumstances.

Last, we also find that Arrojo assumes that meaning can be considered an object

distinct from the style of the text in which it appears. Otherwise she would have quoted Nietzsche and Mounin in their original languages, German and French. By using a translation of the passage by Nietzsche in her epigraph — a translation that, as Arrojo claims in this very article, necessarily contains the marks of the translator[2] — she makes it clear that the only thing she is interested in is the meaning, this object that can be conveniently detached from the text, and so necessarily from the author's style, an object that can be transported from German to Portuguese.

We see, then, that for the purpose of writing an article concerned with the deconstruction of logocentrism, Arrojo relies precisely on those aspects of the logocentric view that, according to her, should be deconstructed. Of course, the author might argue that this is just an approximation; that in fact she knows that the translation of Mounin made by the Brazilian (or Portuguese) translator is not the same thing as Mounin's French text, just as she knows that Mounin's text is not a stable representation of Mounin's conscious meanings and intentions; but that, for the purposes of that particular article, she could simply assume these fictions — the fiction of the stable and conscious original, the fiction of the equivalent translation, and so on.

Well, this hypothetical defense of Arrojo's positions is precisely the point I want to make. All critiques of logocentrism raise substantial issues. Arrojo is right to point out the impossibility of perfectly literal translations, in which the translator's work is entirely invisible. Again, she is right to say that it is impossible to determine exactly the unique, precise meaning of a text, or to identify such a meaning with the author's conscious intention. And, of course, it is indeed naïve to hold that meanings are abstract entities that can be isolated from the text's other elements, such as its style. The problem, though, is that for most practical purposes involving the use of texts we *must* adopt certain assumptions, approximations that, even though they do not describe the actual facts exactly, are simply

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[2] "Qualquer tradução, por mais simples e despretensiosa que seja, traz consigo as marcas de sua realização: o tempo, a história, as circunstâncias, os objetivos e as perspectivas de seu realizador." (My translation: "Any translation, however simple and unpretentious, always contains the marks of its making: the time, the history, the circumstances, the purposes and the perspectives of the translator.") Arrojo 1992: 78.

indispensable.[3] We must act as if the authors were conscious subjects and their texts expressed a stable meaning corresponding to their conscious intentions; likewise, when we work with translations, we must act as if these translations were equivalent to their respective originals and could be used in their place. In particular, in the academic world — which includes the world of translation theory — there can be no intellectual discussion unless everyone involved takes for granted that their peers are conscious subjects who express their intentions in original texts, which may be replaced by translations that are functionally equivalent to them (see Pym 1995:14-15). In Wittgenstein's terms, we might say that the language game called "theorizing" is governed by a number of rules, and that assumptions (1)–(3) above are included among these rules. If you don't accept these rules, you just can't play the game.

The central problem with the deconstructivist approach, then, is that it saws off the branch it is sitting on. It is not just that logocentric assumptions are relied on by a defender of deconstruction in an informal conversation; more seriously, this happens in a scholarly text. Arrojo demonstrates quite clearly that logocentric assumptions are only fictions, but in order to develop her argument she is forced to rely on these very fictions; and she ends up demonstrating also that without them it would be impossible to read, write or translate.

Logocentric assumptions are indeed fictions, and it is quite easy to prove that they are. It is just as easy to demonstrate that the geometrical notions of point, line and plane are abstractions that correspond to no real objects in the world; but such a demonstration in no way invalidates geometry. Since Kant, at least, we know that all science — indeed, all knowledge — is based on representations of reality that are no more than approximations, that do not necessarily correspond to any supposed essence of reality-in-itself. All theoretical representations are artificial constructs; the question is: what are these representations good for? The system of fictions Arrojo calls "logocentrism" makes

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[3] I say "for most practical purposes" because there are special occasions in which such fictions must be questioned. When one writes a psychoanalytical study of a text, for instance, one must suspend the fiction that the meaning of the text reflects the author's conscious intention, and instead try to show how the text betrays his unconscious desires of fears. When one analyzes poetical texts, one may not only question the assumption of conscious intention but also that of the stability of meaning, since one of the characteristics of the poetic texts is its polysemy, its semantic indefiniteness. And, of course, when we criticize a translation, we suspend the fiction of equivalence, underscoring precisely those passages in the text in which the supposed equivalence does not hold. See Britto 1995a and 1995b. I will return to this point later.

possible the production and understanding of texts — no less.

So we arrive at the question in the title of this paper: Why deconstruct? Has deconstruction benefited translation theory in any way? My answer is: Yes. As I hope I have been able to demonstrate, the very textual practice of deconstructionists themselves shows that it would be impossible to do without logocentric assumptions, which happen to be the basic assumptions of textuality. But by pointing to the artificial nature of these assumptions, deconstructionists have called into question a number of categories that had been hypostatized for too long. About one point I am completely in agreement with Arrojo: no real advance will be possible in the field of translation theory as long as people believe that linguistics will some day become scientific in the same sense that physics is scientific. It simply won't do to argue that the reason why we don't have a solid theory of translation is the fact that we don't yet have a linguistic theory as solid as, say, Einsteinian physics. We might as well wait for the advent of the perpetual-motion machine or the philosopher's stone. In physics, the metalanguage used by the scientist is not part of the object he intends to describe; in the case of linguistics, however, the scholar's metalanguage is no more than a subset of natural language, which is itself the object of study; and this circularity has inescapable implications. So far the deconstructionist critique is quite right; the problem is that it does not know when to stop deconstructing. Once deconstructionism has demolished the obsolete building of Positivist scientism, it goes on to take away the ground that provides support not only to such outdated constructions but also to anything that can possibly be built. We are right to criticize the idea that the scientific goals linguistics (or any other human science) should aspire to should be the same as those of natural science. When, however, Arrojo sets out to deconstruct "the belief that there are objects independently of subjects and of history" (Arrojo 1992:74), we begin to suspect that the baby is being thrown away with the bathwater, and that what began as an entirely welcome critique of a mistaken view of linguistics is coming dangerously close to a new version of the dream of the Red Knight.

The great merit of deconstruction, then, is that it has raised questions that have made us all — whatever the positions we defend — more aware of the difference between

the ideal goals of translation and what can actually be expected from a real-life translation. To argue, in this day and age, that a given translation of a given text is the only correct or possible one amounts to a declaration of theoretical naïveté. Perhaps the best light we can cast on deconstruction is to think of it as an approach with a purely negative value: it is good for pointing to the limitations of current concepts, but quite incapable of proposing viable alternatives.[4] We may learn from the discussions raised by deconstructionists without accepting their ultimate conclusions, just as we may accept the Marxist critique of social injustice caused by capitalism without necessarily concluding that there is an urgent need to implement the dictatorship of the proletariat. That is why I myself, as a teacher of translation, believe that deconstructionist texts should be included in the bibliographies of translation courses. Given the fact that freshmen tend to be devoid of any theoretical sophistication, it is a salutary practice to have them read texts that fly in the face of common sense. The best textbook I know for Translation 1.0 is Rosemary Arrojo's *Oficina de tradução* (Arrojo 1986).

To conclude, I would like to return to the point that to relativize is not the same thing as to abolish. Deconstructive critique forces us to relativize a number of concepts — that is, to take them for what they are, fictions and not realities. But we cannot do without these fictions: and "cannot" is not being used here in the deontic sense, as a synonym for "should not"; rather, it points to a practical impossibility. Such concepts as "meaning," "original" and "equivalence" are indispensable assumptions of most textual practices, however imperfect they may be shown to be. We must criticize them, we must be aware of their constructed nature, but we still need them. The name of the logocentrist game is language. To refuse to play it is to condemn oneself to silence.

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[4] My position is similar to that adopted by Clifford Geertz in relation to postmodern trends in anthropology. Interviewed by a Brazilian newspaper, Geertz said: "I believe that postmoderns are raising interesting questions that must be faced even by those of us who may not be enthusiastic about the answers they provide… as a critique, I believe it has had significant value, but as a positive, constructive force, I am a bit more skeptical" (my translation of the Portuguese text in Geertz 2001).

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