

Response

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Douglas Robinson

What We Agree On

I have known and liked Andrew Chesterman since we were both foreign lecturers in Finland in the mid-1970s (he moved there a few years before I did, and stayed on much longer, for nearly half a century now, whereas I left after only 14 years), and have respected his contributions to the TS field beginning with *Memes of Translation*—in fact I find them always usefully provocative. I have played a similar provocateur's role in the field, and—narcissistically, I suppose—value it. But also—perhaps equally narcissistically—I get tired of it. (I know: in saying that, I'm again playing the role.) I confess to feeling some doubt in advance about participating in this forum, because I assumed that Andrew would be playing the provocateur's role to the hilt, for the purposes of igniting a heated discussion—and I think I was right. To my mind, the chest-thumping about Popper, science, and universalism is sheer provocation. In fact, he takes most of it back along the way. His account of the attacks on Eurocentrism in TS is a blatant straw-man argument: as several of the first-round responders pointed out, nobody actually believes that arguments should be valued based on some kind of equal-distribution model of where they're from.

I suspect, too, as several early responders also argued, that Andrew is actually much more sympathetic and open to voices from outside Europe than he's pretending to be to stir up debate. After all, when he and I moved to Finland, it was itself just barely Europe. It was a northern backwater trapped between the Baltic and the Soviet Union that was impoverished by crushing war reparations and was undergoing massive social upheavals caused by too-rapid urbanization and modernization. Nobody outside Finland could speak Finnish, a non-Indo-European language, or cared to learn it, and Finns tended to despise and deprecate their own ability to speak at all, to speak up, to be heard, let alone their ability to do so in foreign languages. Now, of course, Finland is one of the most respected countries in Europe. As Andrew hints, Finnish TS scholars have brilliantly put the country on the world's TS map. Finnish universities are regularly ranked among the best in the world. In Hong Kong people regularly hold Finnish secondary education up to me as a model for the rest of the world. But it wasn't like that in the early 1970s.

And as members of hegemonic cultures—England and the US—who quickly learned Finnish and assimilated to Finnish culture, Andrew and I both experienced the powerful phenomenological shift in center-periphery alignments that I assume propelled us both into TS in the first place. Given that shared history, I prefer to doubt that he actually believes the high-flown drivel he's spouting here. He's playing devil's advocate. I think he actually shares with me and most of his other responders something like the series of experiential beliefs that I list below. (I like to assume that the “we” of the propositions is anyone, from any culture, from anywhere in the world. But I could be wrong.)

1. Cultures tend to naturalize, and so implicitly or explicitly to universalize, their norms, values, assumptions. Most of us grow up with these universalizing tendencies, grow up taking them for granted, because most of us spend our formative years in a single culture.

2. Some of us grow up in cultural contact zones, either by being moved around by our parents or by living in an occupied or otherwise dominated culture with competing hierarchized value systems. For others, travel, living abroad, extensive reading, etc. tend in adulthood to perspectivize the naturalizing/universalizing tendencies of culture. In either case, while we are in this or that contact zone our self-universalizing inclinations may fail, may provide inadequate preparation for unfamiliar cultural experiences, and so may leave us pragmatically in the lurch.
3. In response to the unsettling disorientation that results, we experience the need to know more about the world, and specifically about cultural diversity.
4. Because we realize that our disorientation was a product of the tunnel vision created by the universalization of our own cultural perspective, as we seek enhanced knowledge about the world we also experience the need to be as open as possible to new perspectives, new ways of thinking about it.
5. Those new perspectives and new ways of thinking often entail local histories (initially foreign to us) that imply an imaginary center-periphery dynamic that we find strange, because it tends to peripheralize or provincialize us. We find it useful to occupy such perspectives hermeneutically, to project ourselves feelingly into cultural perspectives that are very different from the ones we grew up with. We do this not only by learning foreign languages and adapting to foreign cultures, but by reading work written in those languages and seeking to feel our way into them, and by remaining open to correction when locally born and raised members of (or better assimilated converts to) those cultures point out our errors.
6. We also notice along the way that some parts of the world tend to produce large numbers of top scholars, brilliant theorists, important books and articles, influential presses and journals, ground-breaking conferences and symposia, and so on, while other parts of the world tend to be more anxiously derivative, looking to the former for guidance and leadership. We wonder why that is. Is it that the general level of intelligence in the former areas is higher? Do those former cultures simply have more money to throw at scholarship? Or is it perhaps that long complicated histories of power differentials have tended to concentrate financial, cultural, intellectual, emotional, and symbolic (prestige) resources in the former areas, so that the best and the brightest representatives of the latter cultures tend to move to those centers for education and work, and tend to publish their thoughts in the languages of those cultures?
7. We also wonder, though of course we refrain from voicing this: are the people left behind in the latter cultures, the neglected peripheries, all just stupid? Or are they potentially just as brilliant as the top scholars in the former culture, but for historical (including sociohistorical and psychohistorical) reasons have simply not been encouraged or pushed to develop their intelligence in effective ways? Or are they already just as brilliant as the top scholars in the former culture, but simply publishing in a language that we can't read, and don't consider important enough to try to learn, or to hire someone to translate from? Or (least flattering for us) are they publishing interesting things in a language we can read, but because the presses and journals that

publish them are not prestigious ones in the global centers, and print their writings on cheap paper with ugly typefaces, we simply don't consider them worth reading?

8. So we move to the periphery to find out—and what we find there is that it is its own center. The rest of the world is its periphery. It has its own power hierarchies, its own peculiar distribution of resources, its own value system, its own history of accommodation and resistance to distant power cultures and elites, its own research agendas, etc. It may have neglected certain historical or intellectual resources that we (in our great wisdom) think should have been better developed, but as we look into those areas, we find that a few people are already working to develop them, to win an audience for them, to populate a field of relative ignorance with knowledge, with knowers. We also find creative, original thinkers, some of whom have returned from the global centers for family reasons, or patriotic reasons, or have been lured back by a high salary or attractive research conditions; others have never left, have simply never felt the pull of the powerful cultures. Talking to them, we don't feel the global power differentials. From a God's-eye perspective, perhaps, that is an illusion: the power differentials are still there. But for a while it's nice not to feel them.

Would Andrew disagree with any of this? I doubt it. If I'm right, the whole forum is just an opportunity to demolish the false shibboleths of the anti-Eurocentrism argument, and elicit a stronger and clearer formulation of the emerging expanded scope and reach of TS—a purpose Andrew has served nicely by speaking in the rather pompous voice of the Popperian scientist, the colonial overlord, the sanctimonious missionary, and so drawing the articulate ire of people with whom he already mostly agrees. So can we please consider the matter settled, and get back to work?

Note on Contributor

Douglas Robinson is Chair Professor of English and Dean of the Arts Faculty at Hong Kong Baptist University. He is author of *The Translator's Turn* (1991), *Translation and Taboo* (1996), *What Is Translation?* (1997), *Becoming a Translator* (1997, 2003, 2012), *Translation and Empire* (1997), *Who Translates?* (2001), *Performative Linguistics: Speaking and Translating as Doing Things With Words* (2003), *Translation and the Problem of Sway* (2011), *Schleiermacher's Icoses: Social Ecologies of the Different Methods of Translation* (2013), and numerous other books and articles on language, literature, culture, and rhetoric. He has been a freelance translator from Finnish to English since 1975, doing mostly technical translation until around 2000, mostly literary and dramatic translation since 2005.