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Meschonnic, Henri. *Ethics and Politics of Translating*. Trans. by Pier-Pascale Boulanger. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamin Publishing Company, 2011, 178 pp.

Ethics and Politics of Translating, written by Henri Meschonnic and translated from the French by Pier-Pascale Boulanger provides an in-depth look at the theory of language in regard to translational studies. Meschonnic divides his analysis into sixteen chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of the ethics of translating and how one should approach specific types of texts. Meschonnic spends the majority of his book proving that ethics is not a social responsibility, “but the pursuit of a subject striving to constitute itself through its activity.” Throughout his essay, Meschonnic uses the terminology of semiotics. For

example, he defines the sign in the following way: “the signified or the meaning of words... predominates by way of consensus and obscures everything that is not.” Meschonnic stresses that in order to successfully translate a word, the translator needs to displace preconceived notions as well as recognize the difference between the *langue*, which is thinking in terms of the sign and language, encompassing meaning and rhythm. Throughout his essay, Meschonnic demonstrates the many complexities involving language theory.

To begin, Meschonnic emphasizes that the goal of the translator cannot be to make money. Today, the majority of the translator’s ethics are dictated by commercial criteria; that is, the translator creates a translation that will be satisfying to the general public. Meschonnic argues that a certain degree of impersonality is needed in order to produce a translation free from bias. This is where ethics comes into play. Translators with sound ethics recognize that they have

the responsibility to free themselves from any prejudices.

In chapter three, Meschonnic calls for the necessity of an ethics of language and an ethics of translating. He says that ethics and language theory are inseparable. He also brings up a concept called thinking language, which he defines as “different from knowledge, from sciences. It is concerned with what we do not know we are saying when we talk about ‘*savoir-vivre*.’...it is the language used for living.” The problem of the sign, Meschonnic then explains, is that it prevents us as an audience from utilizing thinking language.

Meschonnic then argues that many translators do not consider language theory when translating. The *langue* is simply the meaning of the word, whereas language theory is all-encompassing and includes the rhythm of the text, the movement of speech and different meanings of words culture-specific. When the movement of speech is not translated, a significant part of the text can be easily lost. Meschonnic

writes, “the record of speech in writing’- supposes a gesturing of meaning, thus a positional rhythmic or semantics. It is widely erased. If we do not translate it, translation is speechless.”

Meschonnic defines continuum as “the state of things or ideas that are interdependent; epistemological interconnectedness.” He argues that this is relevant to translation since, when translating one needs to think about the sense and style of the language as a whole, rather than merely the individual meaning of the words. Conversely, there is the problem of the discontinuum that he describes as “the collateral damage of the sign, the fallacious opposition between verse and prose.” That said, the notion of a single meaning to a word is an obstacle to the thought and theory of language.

Meschonnic asks the question whether translating is writing or unwriting. At first he deduces that most translations are unwritings, which is why they quickly become outdated. If translating were writing, works would

not have to be retranslated with such frequency. This is why Meschonnic calls most translations erasers, “since they erase the rhythm and the signifier.” Since most translators simply translate the sign instead of the poem, which is the theory of language, they are actually unwriting the original work.

In both understanding and translating there is an element of interpretation. However, understanding is already translating while translating simply supposes that there is understanding. As mentioned above, translating to the sign instead of to the poem erases language theory. To combat this obstacle, according to the author, translators must change their point of view. Meschonnic writes, “translating shows simultaneously, inseparably, the interaction between language, poem, ethics and politics.” In order to translate a text well, a translator needs to practice an inclusive theory of language.

In chapter eight, Meschonnic criticizes the notion of translation as a single discipline. He has res-

ervations since language theory is so broad and therefore requires a great deal to study and to learn. He also criticizes the saying that, “it is always possible to say things in another way.” He argues that this is true for the *langue* but not for discourse. Meschonnic also writes that, “dictionaries and grammars are the dead bones of language; that words do not come before discourse, they come through discourse.” In other words, a reliance on dictionaries and grammar to translate needs to be avoided. Instead, the rhythm and the cultural significance of the text should be translated.

Almost always, translating religious texts becomes a political problem. Meschonnic uses the example of the word “God” versus “Allah.” Following Meschonnic, “If we say “*God*,” in translation (in whichever language), we place ourselves in a universal perspective...but if we translate, or rather if we do not translate, keeping “Allah,” we make of Islam a universal.” It is difficult for the translator to choose between two such words

without alienating a group of readers. Another issue regarding the translation of religious texts concerns rhythm. Biblical rhythmicity differs greatly from those used in modern works. Therefore, it gives the translator the difficult responsibility of correctly translating the movement of speech.

One of Meschonnic's ultimate goals is to retranslate the Bible into French. He argues that previous translators showed carelessness for what they pretend to revere. One of the reasons the Bible is hard to translate is because there is both verse and prose, since, if not done correctly, it distorts the work's rhythm. According to Meschonnic, "to destheologize is to desemiotize." That is, to translate the Bible regardless of a given religious interpretation is to neglect to realize that the signifiers and the rhythms of a text are essential components of meaning.

Another term that Meschonnic uses with some frequency is *embiblicizing*, which means "to render the rhythmic features spe-

cific to the Hebrew Bible in order to convey affect and produce a translation of forceful expression." Meschonnic argues that embiblicizing is what translating the Bible does to the voice. Orality, he says "no longer in the sense of the sign, where all we hear is sound opposed to meaning. In the continuum, orality is of the body-in-language. It is the subject we hear." The benefit of translating the voice correctly is to see the rhythm of the original work in the translation. The voice also shares with the reader much of the history of the text.

Meschonnic devotes a chapter to the restoration of poems inherent within biblical psalms, a mix of music and speech, which is therefore a poetic problem. In translation, one must reverse the usual relationship between interpreting and translating. Psalm practically have no story and are recitative, which means there is little to no interpretation in the process of their translation. This is a grand reversal from the rest of Meschonnic's theory of language, which dictates that inter-

pretation and the movement of speech are as important as the sign of the discourse.

Grammar is another key concept in the author's ethics of translation. Meschonnic writes, "so, 'you shall rule over him' or 'rule over him'?" The interpretation itself turns into an ethics of self-satisfaction. This shows that one does not translate on the basis of grammar, but rather on the basis of ethics itself. The combination of the sign, the movement of speech and the grammar of an original work are all very important to consider when translating. As Meschonnic puts it, "translating shows, better than any other act of language, that an act of language is an ethical act."

Meschonnic concludes his essay by stressing the necessity of good translating, which means fully translating the text. He provides Europe as an example, in that it "is the only cultural continent to know its founding texts exclusively through translation." This makes it essential to translate well in order to preserve the intentions of the text. Moreover, Meschonnic highlights that "we must no longer take translating just as a means of transmitting meaning, but as an unveiling of the unquestioned and unthought theory of language in the act of translating."

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