Theo Hermans. (2007), *The Conference of the Tongues*. Manchester, UK: St. Jerome Publishing. Pages 190.

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"Because translations re-enact other texts, they are *metarepresentations*, that is, representations of representations" (Hermans 2007: 116).

Since Georges Steiner's *After Babel* (1975), it is quite rare in translation studies that scholars would develop an extensive study on a 'metatheory' of translation. Perhaps Theo Hermans's *The Conference of the Tongues* (2007) comes as a new breath for this challenge. In an unconventional approach to translation, Hermans takes us through his unusual reflections on translation, starting from a basic, and somewhat worn out, concept of equivalence, to the astounding notion of self-reference which turns out to be the book's recurring theme. The book also addresses issues from other disciplines of which the relationship with translation studies has hardly been investigated, namely demonstration theory, theology and social system theory. Throughout his book, Hermans argues against the usually-held concept of translation as a straightforward act of communication by announcing that translation can only be taken as such, not by its own internal logic, but through external interventions such as speech acts of authentication or legal endorsement. The notion of speech act defining translation is elaborated throughout the book and, together with self-reference, Hermans has succeeded in breaking a new theoretical ground in describing what translation is.

Chapter one is enigmatically entitled 'The End', suggesting that the author would tackle the problem from the bottom-up. Here equivalence, the apparent starting point, is analysed from the very outset. Hermans uses the story of Joseph Smith, the founder of the church of Mormon as a case in point. The voice from

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heaven, declaring Smith's translation of the golden plates accurate and therefore true words of God, becomes a scene where all discussion of speech act take its departure. What actually constitutes translation when equivalence is rather a result of semiotic and semantic coincidence as well as artificial linguistic symmetry? Instead, Hermans quickly points to the overlooked fact that translation is not a translation until it is pronounced so. More evidence from legal aspects such as the Vienna Treaties, the Canadian and Belgian Constitutions and the Treaty of Rome, show that when dealing with multiple languages, legalisation plays a crucial role in determining which language is held as the most authoritative. The authority of language therefore does not lie in itself, but in the external institution that endorses it.

Chapter 2, 'Before the End', moves from the outset back to the polemical process of interpreting a translation. In the previous chapter, Hermans sees external speech acts that define translation a as force that put an end to the endless interpretive possibility of a translation by imposing on it a static status. However, Hermans notes that, despite the limit, translation entails the quality which he calls 'self-referentiality' that remains dormant in every translation, but calls attention to itself when compelled to self-observe in situations like polysemy, word pun, or when translation is criticised and other available options are argued as better choices. These situations are instances of when translation inevitably faces the challenge of reflecting on itself, and call forth further interpretations. This self-reference is a crucial moment when translation becomes awake and manifests itself as a translation, not an illusion of the original that ties it to one single interpretation.

At this point, the rest of the book elaborates on the notions of speech acts and self-reference by relating them to other subjects. In chapter 3, Hermans asks whether it is possible for us to translate what we disagree. He uses the American translation of Hitler's autobiography *Mein Kampf* which was heavily annotated and came with a long preface warning the readers of Hitler's propagandistic nature and therefore the content of the translation was not to be fully trusted. This almost raises an ethical question: so how can we trust the translation to be 'faithful' or reporting the content of the original without prejudice? Translation, in this sense, is evidently framed by a set of ideology that aims to direct our reading of the text. Hermans sees the discrepancy between the discordant voice of the translator and the content s/he

reports as what he calls the 'irony's echo'. Building on various linguistic and communication theories, Hermans demonstrates how we can view translation as a form of quotation or reported speech. The idea of quotation and reported speech points to the illocutionary power of the speaker who takes control over the speech s/he reports that we can see in the degree of intervention by the reporter him/herself. The distance between the speech and the reporter creates a kind of irony, a voice of discord that in turns marks the whole demonstration of quotation a process of self observation that calls attention to its status as a translation. In this way, we can notice that speech act (act of quotation) is also related to translation's self-reference in that it can be seen as a form of self-commentary. The paratext (preface) that frames the American translation of *Mein Kampf* can also be seen as a self-commentary speech act on the part of the liberal democratic camp. The irony that echoes from such a translation is a proof of the translation's self-reference.

Chapter 4 continues the discussion of speech act and self-reference with the analysis of Christian tradition of Eucharist that has long been debated with regards to Christ's Real Presence in the form of bread and wine. Hermans compares the Eucharist declaration "hoc est corpus meum" (This is my body) that designates the bread as the flesh and the wine as the blood of Christ with the idea of translation as a form of representation. By borrowing the Eucharist metaphor, Hermans questions whether it is the power stored in the bread and wine itself, or the illocutionary force evoked by the priest's declaration "hoc est corpus meum" that makes the bread and wine Christ's Real Presence. While the Eucharist tradition can lead to further discussion of representation and Real Presence, for translation, it raises the question of authority as to who has the right to proclaim a certain thing a representation of something, or to announce any text a translation. It also points to the importance of tradition and convention in providing the source of power that enforces the authorisation of each translation.

Chapter 5 seems to be a continuation of Hermans's own engagement with the system approach to translation that he analyses extensively in his previous book *Translation in Systems* (1997). In this chapter ('Connecting Systems'), Hermans finally found a model that is more flexible than the rigid ones he criticised in *Translation in Systems*, namely norm theory and polysystem theory. The model is

taken from Niklas Luhmann's system theory of which the core element is communication. Luhmann's system and communication comes in handy for Hermans who disagrees with the reductionistic tendency caused by the jargons attached to these theories. Communication in Luhmannian sense does not concern the transmission of message in the traditional sense, but it entails 'metacommunication' or communication that triggers further communications in a self-reproducing or 'autopoietic' system—a process that bears close affinity to Hermans's self-reference. In this model, translation is seen as self-perpetuating rather than a reproduction of the original. Hermans goes on to discuss the application of Luhmann's system theory to the form of translation, translator training, a 'second-order' observation and the history of translation. The key idea is that there is the underlying sort of 'system' that keeps translation on the wheel of self-reproducing motion and makes the field somewhat autonomous. However, it remains implausible as to what is the role of agency in this system since it appears to be understated.

In the last chapter, Hermans attempts to probe the issue of cross-cultural study of translation that runs the risk of simplification and reduction by the jargon-prone approaches. Scholars can never agree on the accurate lexicon used to describe items from other cultures. But if they succeed in agreeing on one, the case is closed and it becomes hard for us to see certain cross-cultural phenomena in different lights since the gate to multiple interpretations is shut down. To offer a solution, Hermans suggests the notion of 'thick translation' which was initially used by Kwame Anthony Appiah to describe translation with towering footnotes that aim to make the complexity of the original present as much as possible. Hermans calls for thick translation, not in the light of solely employing extensive annotation, but to encourage translation that exhibits self-reflexiveness—that is, calling attention to its own unlimited possibility of interpretation that is not necessarily bound by reductionistic theories or jargons.

The Conference of the Tongues is a daring book that refuses to follow the genealogy of any established translation school. Most people who read it may doubt what they can do with it since it does not subscribe solidly to any discipline. It does not offer a strong, and usually dry, theoretical model that students can apply directly

to their case studies. Instead, it encourages us to reflect on the self-referential attribute of translation that one would not easily notice. It also supports the endless possibility of interpretation that can hardly be achieved in the absence of self-reflexiveness. Hermans's book, written in his well-known laconic style, is an interplay of original observation, metatheory and pragmatism that one would not find uncomfortable or head-squeezing reading it. In the time when metatheory of translation loses attention, it timely finds its champion in Theo Hermans.