

The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology

pp. 171-199

Asad, Talal, (1993) *Genealogies of religion: discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press

Atgoffir staff a myfyrwyr Prifysgol Cymru Y Drindod Dewi Sant bod hawlfraint ar y darn hwn ac ar y gwaith y cafodd ei gymryd ohono. Gwnaed y Copi Digidol hwn o dan delerau trwydded CLA sy'n caniatáu i chi:

- fynd at gopi a'i lwytho i lawr;
- argraffu copi;

Sylwch bod y deunydd hwn yn UNIG at ddefnydd myfyrwyr sydd wedi cofrestru ar y cwrs astudio fel y nodir yn yr adran isod. Caniateir i holl staff a myfyrwyr eraill ddarllen y deunydd yn unig ac ni ddylent ei lwytho i lawr ac/neu argraffu copi

Mae'r Copi Digidol hwn ac unrhyw gopi digidol neu brintiedig a ddarparwyd i chi, neu a wnaed gennych, o dan delerau'r Drwydded hon, i'w ddefnyddio gyda'r Cwrs Astudio hwn. Gellwch gadw copïau o'r fath ar ôl i'r cwrs ddod i ben, ond at eich defnydd personol eich hun yn unig. Bydd pob copi (yn cynnwys copïau electronig) yn cynnwys y Rhybudd Hawlfraint hwn a bydd yn rhaid eu dinistrio ac/neu eu dileu pan fydd Prifysgol Cymru Y Drindod Dewi Sant yn galw am hynny.

Ac eithrio'r hyn a ganiateir gan gyfraith hawlfraint, ni chaniateir copïo, cadw neu ddosbarthu pellach (yn cynnwys drwy e-bost) heb ganiatâd deiliad yr hawlfraint.

Mae gan yr awdur (ac mae'r term hwnnw'n cynnwys arlunwyr a chrewyr gweledol eraill) hawliau moesol dros y gwaith ac ni all staff na myfyrwyr achosi, na chaniatáu, i'r gwaith gael ei aflunio, ei lurgunio neu ei addasu mewn unrhyw ffordd arall, neu ei drin yn ddiraddiol mewn unrhyw ffordd, a fyddai'n niweidiol i anrhydedd neu enw da'r awdur.

Mae hon yn fersiwn ddigidol o ddeunydd hawlfraint a wnaed dan drwydded gan ddeiliad yr hawl, ac ni ellir sicrhau ei chywirdeb. Cyfeiriwch at yr argraffiad cyhoeddedig gwreiddiol os gwelwch yn dda.

Trwyddedwyd i'w ddefnyddio ar gyfer y cwrs HPAN5012 - Theory, Methods and Practice: Critical Perspectives in Anthropology

Teitl: *Genealogies of religion: discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*

Enw'r Awdur: Asad, Talal

Enw'r Cyhoeddwr: Johns Hopkins University Press

Staff and students of the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David are reminded that copyright subsists in this extract and the work from which it was taken. This Digital Copy has been made under the terms of a CLA licence which allows you to:

- access and download a copy;
- print out a copy;

Please note that this material is for use ONLY by students registered on the course of study as stated in the section below. All other staff and students are only entitled to browse the material and should not download and/or print out a copy.

This Digital Copy and any digital or printed copy supplied to or made by you under the terms of this Licence are for use in connection with this Course of Study. You may retain such copies after the end of the course, but strictly for your own personal use.

All copies (including electronic copies) shall include this Copyright Notice and shall be destroyed and/or deleted if and when required by University of Wales, Trinity Saint David.

Except as provided for by copyright law, no further copying, storage or distribution (including by e-mail) is permitted without the consent of the copyright holder

The author (which term includes artists and other visual creators) has moral rights in the work and neither staff nor students may cause, or permit, the distortion, mutilation or other modification of the work, or any other derogatory treatment of it, which would be prejudicial to the honour or reputation of the author. This is a digital version of copyright material made under licence from the rightsholder, and its accuracy cannot be guaranteed. Please refer to the original published edition.

Course of Study: HPAN5012 - Theory, Methods and Practice: Critical Perspectives in Anthropology

Title: *Genealogies of religion: discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*

Name of Author: Asad, Talal

Name of Publisher: Johns Hopkins University Press

THE CONCEPT OF
CULTURAL TRANSLATION
IN BRITISH SOCIAL
ANTHROPOLOGY

All anthropologists are familiar with E. B. Tylor's famous definition of culture: "Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." It would be interesting to trace how and when this notion of culture, with its enumeration of "capabilities and habits" and its emphasis on what Linton called *social heredity* (focusing on the process of learning) was transformed into the notion of a text—that is, into something resembling an inscribed discourse. One obvious clue to this change is to be found in the way that a notion of language as the precondition of historical continuity and social learning ("cultivation") came to dominate the perspective of social anthropologists.

In a general way, of course, such an interest in language predates Tylor, but in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it tended to be central to varieties of nationalist literary theory and education (cf. Eagleton 1983, chap. 2) rather than to the other human sciences. When and in what ways did it become crucial for British social anthropology? I do not intend to attempt such a history here, but merely to remind ourselves that the phrase "the translation of cultures," which increasingly since the 1950s has become an almost banal description of the distinctive task of social anthropology, was not always so much in evidence. I want to stress that this apparent shift is not identical with the old pre-functionalism/functionalism periodization. Nor is it simply a matter of a direct interest in language and meaning that was previously lacking (Crick 1976). Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the found-

ers of the so-called functionalist school, wrote much on "primitive language" and collected enormous quantities of linguistic material (proverbs, kinship terminology, magical spells, and so on) for anthropological analysis. But he never thought of his work in terms of the translation of cultures.

Godfrey Lienhardt's paper "Modes of Thought" (1954) is possibly one of the earliest—certainly one of the most subtle—examples of the use of this notion of translation explicitly to describe a central task of social anthropology. "The problem of describing to others how members of a remote tribe think then begins to appear largely as one of translation, of making the coherence primitive thought has in the languages it really lives in, as clear as possible in our own" (97). This statement is quoted and criticized in the article by Ernest Gellner that I analyze in the next section, and I shall return to it in the context of Gellner's argument. Here I draw attention briefly to Lienhardt's use of the word *translation* to refer not to linguistic matter per se but to "modes of thought" that are embodied in such matter. It may not be without significance, incidentally, that Lienhardt has a background in English literature, that he was a pupil of F. R. Leavis's at Cambridge before he became a pupil and collaborator of E. E. Evans-Pritchard's at Oxford.

Oxford is, of course, famous as the anthropological center in Britain most self-conscious about its concern with the translation of cultures. The best-known introductory textbook to emerge from that center, John Beattie's *Other Cultures* (1964), emphasized the centrality of the problem of translation for social anthropology and distinguished (but did not separate) "culture" from "language" in a way that was becoming familiar to anthropologists—though not necessarily therefore entirely clear (see 89–90).

It is interesting to find Edmund Leach, who has never been associated with Oxford, employing the same notion in his conclusion to a historical sketch of social anthropology a decade later:

We started by emphasizing how different are "the others"—and made them not only different but remote and inferior. Sentimentally we then took the opposite track and argued that all human beings are alike; we can understand Trobrianders or the Barotse because their motivations are just the same as our own; but that didn't work either, "the others" remained obstinately other. But now we have come to

see that the essential problem is one of translation. The linguists have shown us that all translation is difficult, and that perfect translation is usually impossible. And yet we know that for practical purposes a tolerably satisfactory translation is always possible even when the original "text" is highly abstruse. Languages are different but not so different as all that. Looked at in this way social anthropologists are engaged in establishing a methodology for the translation of cultural language. (1973, 772)

Even Max Gluckman (1973, 905), responding shortly afterward to Leach, accepts the centrality of cultural translation, while proposing a very different genealogy for that anthropological practice.

Yet despite the general agreement with which this notion has been accepted as part of the self-definition of British social anthropology, it has received little systematic examination from within the profession. One partial exception is Rodney Needham's *Belief, Language, and Experience* (1972). This is a complex, scholarly work that deserves extended treatment. Here, however, I wish to concentrate on a shorter text, Ernest Gellner's "Concepts and Society," which appears to be fairly widely used in undergraduate courses at British universities and is still available in several popular collections. I propose, therefore, to devote the next section to a detailed examination of that essay and then to take up some points that emerge from my discussion in the sections that follow.

A Theoretical Text

Gellner's "Concepts and Society" is concerned with the way in which functionalist anthropologists deal with problems of interpreting and translating the discourse of alien societies. His basic argument is that (a) contemporary anthropologists insist on interpreting exotic concepts and beliefs within a social context, but that (b) in doing so they ensure that apparently absurd or incoherent assertions are always given an acceptable meaning, and that (c) while the contextual method of interpretation is in principle valid, the "excessive charity" that usually goes with it is not. The paper contains several diagrams intended to fix and clarify the relevant cultural processes visually.

Gellner introduces the problem of interpretation by reference to Kurt Samuelsson's *Religion and Economic Action* (1961), which is an eco-

conomic historian's attack on the Weberian Protestant Ethic thesis. Samuelsson takes issue with the fact that Weber and his supporters have reinterpreted religious texts in a way that enables them to extract meanings that confirm the thesis. Gellner presents this example merely to bring out more sharply the contrasting position of the functionalist anthropologist:

I am not concerned, nor competent, to argue whether Samuelsson's employment, in this particular case, of his tacit principle that one must not reinterpret the assertions one actually finds, is valid. What is relevant here is that if such a principle is made explicit and generalized, it would make nonsense of most sociological studies of the relationship of belief and conduct. We shall find anthropologists driven to employ the very opposite principle, the insistence rather than refusal of contextual re-interpretation. (20)

But this modest disclaimer of competence allows too many interesting questions to drift by. To begin with, it should be noted that Samuelsson does not hold to the principle that one must *never* reinterpret. Nor does he insist that there is *never* a significant connection between a religious text and its social context, but only that the conclusion the Weber thesis seeks to make cannot be established (see, e.g., Samuelsson 1961, 69). There is, furthermore, a real contrast that Gellner might have picked up between the Samuelsson example and the typical anthropologist's predicament. For economic historians and sociologists involved in the Weber debate, historical texts are a primary datum in relation to which the social contexts must be reconstructed. The anthropological fieldworker begins with a social situation within which something is said, and it is the cultural significance of these enunciations that must be reconstructed. This is not to say, of course, that the historian can ever approach his archival material without some conception of its historical context, or that the fieldworker can define the social situation independently of what was said within it. The contrast, such as it is, is one of orientation, which follows from the fact that the historian is *given* a text and the ethnographer has *to construct one*.

Instead of investigating this important contrast (and how it actually works in practice), Gellner rushes along to define and commend what he calls "moderate Functionalism" as a method, which

consists of the insistence on the fact that concepts and beliefs do not exist in isolation, in texts or in individual minds, but in the life of men and societies. The activities and institutions, in the context of which a word or phrase or set of phrases is used, must be known before that word or those phrases can be understood, before we can really speak of a *concept* or a belief. (22)

This is certainly well put. At this point, the reader might expect a discussion of the different ways in which language is encountered by the ethnographers in the field, how utterances are produced, verbal meanings organized, rhetorical effects attained, and culturally appropriate responses elicited. After all, Wittgenstein had already sensitized British philosophers to the complexity of language-in-use, and J. L. Austin had set up distinctions between the different levels of speech production and reception in a way that foreshadowed what anthropologists would later call *the ethnography of speaking*. But Gellner had previously rejected the suggestion that this philosophical movement had anything of value to teach (see his polemic in *Words and Things*, 1959), and like other critics, he always insisted that its concern with understanding everyday language was merely a disguise for defending established ways of speaking about the world, for denying that it was possible for such speechways to be illogical or absurd. Gellner has always been determined to maintain the distinction between defending and explaining "concepts and beliefs" and to warn against the kind of anthropological translation that rules out a priori the critical distance necessary for explaining how concepts actually function, for "to understand the *working* of the concepts of society," he writes, "is to understand its institutions" (18; see also note 1 on the same page).

This is why Gellner's brief statement about moderate functionalism quoted above leads him immediately to a discussion of Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, which, besides being "one of the fountainheads of Functionalism in general" (22), is concerned to explain rather than to defend concepts—to explain, more precisely, "the compulsive nature of our categorial concepts" (223) in terms of certain collective processes. Thus:

Our contemporary invocations of the functional, social-context approach to the study and interpretation of concepts is in various ways very different from Durkheim's. Durkheim was not so much con-

cerned to defend the concepts of primitive societies: in their setting, they did not need a defence, and in the setting of modern and changing societies, he was not anxious to defend what was archaic, nor loath to suggest that some intellectual luggage might well be archaic. He was really concerned to explain the compulsiveness of what in practice did not seem to need any defence (and in so doing, he claimed he was solving the problem of knowledge whose solution had in his view evaded Kant and others, and to be solving it without falling into either empiricism or apriorism). Whether he was successful I do not propose to discuss: for a variety of reasons it seems to me that he was not. (23)

It is clear that Gellner has recognized the basic project of *Elementary Forms*—namely, its attempt to explain the compulsive nature of socially defined concepts—but he moves too hastily from a consideration of what might be involved in such a problem to a dismissal of Durkheim's attempt at explanation. The possibility that a priori *denuciation* may not further the purposes of explanation any better than *defense* does not seem to be envisaged in "Concepts and Society." Instead, the reader is reminded, by way of quotation from Lienhardt, that the contemporary anthropologist typically "appears to make it a condition of a good translation that it conveys the coherence which he assumes is there to be found in primitive thought" (26). So we have here what I think is a misleading contrast—Durkheim's attempt to explain versus the contemporary anthropologist's attempt to defend. I shall return to this point later, but here I want to insist that to argue for a form of coherence by which a discourse is held together is not ipso facto to justify or defend that discourse; it is merely to take an essential step in the problem of explaining its *compulsiveness*. Anyone familiar with psychoanalysis would take this point quite easily. We might put it another way; the criterion of abstract "coherence" or "logicality" (Gellner tends to use these and other terms interchangeably) is not always, and in every case, decisive for accepting or rejecting discourse. This is because, as Gellner himself correctly observes, "Language functions in a variety of ways other than 'referring to objects'" (25). Not every utterance is an assertion. There are many things that language-in-use does, *and is intended to do*, which explains why we may respond positively to discourse that may seem inadequate from a narrow, "logical" point of view. The functions of a particular language,

the intentions of a particular discourse, are of course part of what every competent ethnographer tries to grasp before he can attempt an adequate translation into his own language. In this sense, an assumption of coherence is indispensable to any translation.

Gellner does occasionally come near this point, but quickly brushes it aside in his eagerness to display the "excessive charity" of functionalist anthropologists.

The situation, facing a social anthropologist who wishes to interpret a concept, assertion or doctrine in an alien culture, is basically simple. He is, say, faced with an assertion S in the local language. He has at his disposal the large or infinite set of possible sentences in his own language. . . .

He may not be wholly happy about this situation, but he cannot avoid it. There is no third language which could mediate between the native language and his own, in which equivalences could be stated and which would avoid the pitfalls arising from the fact that his own language has its own ways of handling the world, which may not be those of the native language studied, and which consequently are liable to distort that which is being translated.

Naively, people sometimes think that *reality* itself could be this kind of mediator and "third language." . . . For a variety of powerful reasons, this is of course no good. (24-25)

Again, this sensible statement might seem to some readers to support the demand that the ethnographer must try to reconstruct the various ways in which the native language handles the world, conveys information, and constitutes experience, before translating an alien discourse into the language of his ethnographic text. But Gellner's account proceeds in a different, and very dubious, direction.

Having located an equivalent English sentence, he continues, the anthropologist notices that it inevitably carries a value connotation—that it is, in other words, either Good or Bad. "I do not say 'true' or 'false,' for this only arises with regard to some types of assertion. With regard to others, other dichotomies, such as 'meaningful' and 'absurd' or 'sensible' or 'silly' might apply. I deliberately use the 'Good' and 'Bad' so as to cover all such possible polar alternatives, whichever might best apply to the equivalent of S" (27).

Have we not got here some very curious assumptions, which no practiced translator would ever make? The first is that evaluative

discrimination is always a matter of choosing between polar alternatives; second, that evaluative distinctions are finally reducible to "Good" and "Bad." Clearly, neither of these assumptions is acceptable when stated as a general rule. And then there is the suggestion that the translator's task necessarily involves matching sentence for sentence. But if the skilled translator looks first for any principle of coherence in the discourse to be translated, then tries to reproduce that coherence as nearly as he can in his own language, there cannot be a general rule as to what units the translator will employ—sentences, paragraphs, or even larger units of discourse. To turn my point around: *The appropriateness of the unit employed itself depends on the principle of coherence.*

But Gellner's parable of the anthropologist-translator requires the assumption that it is sentences that the latter matches, because that makes it easier to display how the sin of excessive charity occurs. Having made an initial equivalence between a sentence in the local language and one in his own, the anthropologist notices that the English sentence carries a "Bad" impression. This worries the anthropologist because, so runs Gellner's parable, an ethnographic account giving such an impression might be thought to disparage the natives he has studied, and to disparage other cultures is a sign of ethnocentrism, and ethnocentrism in turn is a symptom of poor anthropology, according to the doctrines of functionalist anthropology. Functionalist method requires that sentences always be evaluated in terms of their own social context. So the worried anthropologist reinterprets the original sentence, with a more flexible and careful use of the contextual method, in order to produce a "Good" translation.

The sin of excessive charity, and the contextual method itself, are together linked, Gellner writes, to the relativistic-functionalist view of thought that goes back to the Enlightenment:

The (unresolved) dilemma, which the thought of the Enlightenment faced, was between a relativistic-functionalist view of thought, and the absolutist claims of enlightened Reason. Viewing man as part of nature, as enlightened Reason requires, it wishes to see his cognitive and evaluative activities as parts of nature too, and hence as varying, legitimately, from organism to organism and context to context. (This is the relativistic-functionalist view.) But at the same time in recommending life according to Reason and Nature, it wished at the very

least to exempt this view itself (and, in practice, some others) from such a relativism. (31)

Typically, Gellner's philosophical formulation presents this "unresolved dilemma" as an abstract opposition between two concepts—"a relativistic-functionalist view of thought, and the absolutist claims of enlightened Reason." But how do these two concepts work as "correlates of . . . the institutions of [Western] society"? (cf. Gellner, 18). It would not be difficult to argue that the claims of "enlightened Reason" are materially more successful in third world countries than many relativistic views, that they have exerted greater authority than the latter in the development of industrial economies and the formation of nation-states. I shall have occasion to discuss this further when examining translation as a process of power. The point is that "the absolutist claims of enlightened Reason" are in effect an institutionalized force,¹ and that as such it is by definition committed to advancing into and appropriating alien territory, and that its opponents (whether explicitly relativistic or not) are by definition defensive. Thus, when Gellner continues on the same page to characterize this abstract dilemma in the attitudes of anthropologists, he fails to consider what cultural translation might involve when it is considered as institutionalized practice, given the wider relationship of unequal societies. For it is not the abstract logic of what individual Western anthropologists say in their ethnographies, but the concrete logic of what their countries (and perhaps they themselves) do in their relations with the third world that should form the starting point for this particular discussion. The dilemmas of relativism appear differently depending on whether we think of abstracted understanding or of historically situated practices.

However, Gellner says he is not in principle against anthropological relativism. "My main point about tolerance-engendering contextual interpretation," he writes, "is that it calls for caution" (32). But why such caution is reserved for "tolerance-engendering" as opposed to *intolerance-engendering* contextual interpretations is not explained.

1. "The eighteenth century witnessed the unfolding of bourgeois society, which saw itself as the new world, laying intellectual claim to the whole world and simultaneously denying the old. It grew out of the territories of the European states and, in dissolving this link, developed a progressive philosophy in line with the process. The subject of that philosophy was all mankind, to be unified from its European centre and led peacefully towards a better future" (Koselleck 1988, 5-6).

After all, Gellner insisted earlier that all translated sentences are bound to be received either as "Good" or as "Bad." Why should we be suspicious only of those that appear "Good"? If "it is the *prior* determination that S, the indigenous affirmation, be interpreted favourably, which determines just how much context will be taken into consideration" (33), can we perhaps escape this vicious circularity by adopting an *unsympathetic* attitude? Gellner does not address himself directly to this possibility here, but one must assume that it cannot be a solution, especially in view of the claim that "there is nothing in the nature of things or societies to dictate visibly just how much context is relevant to any given utterance, or how the context should be described" (33).

Surely this last remark cannot be meant seriously. "Nothing"? How, then, is communication even between individuals in the same society ever possible? Why does one ever say to foreigners that they have misunderstood something they heard or saw? Does social learning produce no skills in the discrimination of relevant contexts? The answers to these questions should be obvious, and they are connected with the fact that the anthropologist's translation is not merely a matter of matching sentences in the abstract, but of *learning to live another form of life* and to speak another kind of language. Which contexts are relevant in different discursive events is something one learns in the course of living, and even though it is often very difficult to verbalize that knowledge, it is still knowledge about something "in the nature of society," about some aspect of living, that indicates (although it does not "dictate") just how much context is relevant to any given utterance. The point, of course, is not that ethnographers cannot know what context is appropriate for giving sense to typical statements, or that they are induced to be more charitable than they should be in translating them, but that their attempts at translation may meet with problems rooted in the linguistic materials they work with *and* the social conditions they work in—both in the field and in their own society. More on this later.

The latter half of Gellner's essay is devoted to examples from ethnographic studies in order to display, first, excessive charity in translation, and then, the explanatory advantages of taking a critical look at the logic of alien religious discourse.

The first set of examples comes from Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer Religion* (1956), in which odd-sounding initial translations of Nuer religious discourse, such as the notorious statement that "a twin is a bird," are

reinterpreted. "This kind of statement," Gellner observes, "appears to be in conflict with the principle of identity or non-contradiction, or with common sense, or with manifest observable fact: human twins are *not* birds, and vice versa" (34). According to Gellner, Evans-Pritchard's reinterpretation absolves Nuer thought from the charge of "pre-logical mentality" by an arbitrary use of the contextual method. The apparent absurdity is reinterpreted to deny that Nuer beliefs conflict with manifest fact by relating the meaning of the "absurd" statement to "logical" behavior. Gellner indicates how this is done by quoting (with the omission of one significant sentence) from Evans-Pritchard:

No contradiction is involved in the statement which, on the contrary, appears quite sensible and even true, to one who presents the idea to himself in the Nuer language and within their system of religious thought. [He does not then take their statements about twins any more literally than they make and understand them themselves.] *They are not saying that a twin has a beak, feathers, and so forth. Nor in their everyday relations as twins do Nuers speak of them as birds or act towards them as though they were birds.* (35: Sentence in brackets omitted by Gellner; emphasis supplied by Gellner)

At this point Gellner breaks off the quotation and interjects in mock despair: "But what, then, *would* count as pre-logical thought? Only, presumably, the behaviour of a totally demented person, suffering from permanent hallucinations, who *would* treat something which is perceptibly a human being as though it had all the attributes of a bird" (35). So eager is Gellner to nail utterances that must count as expressions of "pre-logical thought" that he does not pause to consider what Evans-Pritchard is trying to do. In fact, Evans-Pritchard devotes several pages to explaining this strange sentence. It is plain that he is concerned to explain (in terms of Nuer social life), not to justify (in terms of Western common sense or Western values). The aim of this kind of exegesis is certainly not to persuade Western readers to adopt Nuer religious tradition. Nor does it rule out the possibility that individual speakers make mistakes or utter absurdities in their religious discourse when employing their traditional ways of thinking. It is not clear, therefore, why Gellner should point to this example from *Nuer Religion* to substantiate his charge of excessive charity on the part of functionalist anthropologists. Evans-Pritchard is trying to explain the coherence that gives Nuer religious discourse its sense, not

to defend that sense as having a universal legitimacy—after all, Evans-Pritchard himself was a convert to Catholicism, not to Nuer religion at the time his monograph was written.

Whether Evans-Pritchard succeeds in explaining the basic coherence of Nuer religious discourse is, of course, another question. Several British anthropologists—for example, Raymond Firth (1966)—(though not, to my knowledge, any Nuer themselves) have disputed aspects of Evans-Pritchard's interpretation. But such disagreements are still about different ways of making sense of Nuer religious discourse, not about too much or too little "charity" in translation. In fact, contrary to Gellner's allegations, Evans-Pritchard's exegesis *does* make quite explicit apparent "contradictions," or at least ambiguities, in Nuer concepts—for example, between the notion of a "supreme and omnipresent being" and that of "lesser spirits," both of which are categorized as *kwoth*. And it is precisely because Evans-Pritchard insists on keeping the different senses of *kwoth* together as parts of one concept and does not treat them as homonyms (as Malinowski might have done by relating the word to different contexts of use) that the Nuer concept of spirit might be said to be contradictory. But whether the identification of ambiguities and contradictions in the basic conceptual repertoire of a religious language provides obvious evidence of "pre-logical thought" is, of course, a different issue. I would suggest that it is not, because as an analytical construct, pre-logical thought conflates the common-sense idea of logical mistakes in everyday life with an Enlightenment story of science as the culmination of reason purified at last from magic and religion.

Unfortunately, Gellner's discourse typically evades the issues it seems to be raising, in a style that seeks to hurry the reader along over a series of disclaimers:

I do not wish to be misunderstood: I am *not* arguing that Evans-Pritchard's account of Nuer concepts is a bad one. (Nor am I anxious to revive a doctrine of pre-logical mentality *à la* Levy-Bruhl.) On the contrary, I have the greatest admiration for it. What I am anxious to argue is that contextual interpretation, which offers an account of what assertions "really mean" in opposition to what they seem to mean in isolation, does not by itself clinch matters. (38)

Now, who would have claimed it did? Certainly Evans-Pritchard does not. In any case, the opposition between a contextual interpretation

and one that is not contextual is entirely spurious. Nothing has meaning in isolation. The problem is always, what kind of context?

But that is something Gellner never discusses, except by suggesting that the answer must involve a vicious circularity—or by uttering repeated warnings against excessive charity. (When is charity not excessive?) He appears unaware that for the translator the problem of determining the relevant kind of context in each case is solved by skill in the use of the languages concerned, not by an a priori attitude of intolerance or tolerance. And skill is something that is learned—and therefore something that is necessarily circular, but not viciously so. We are dealing not with an abstract matching of two sets of sentences but with a social practice rooted in modes of life. A translator may make mistakes, or she may knowingly misrepresent something—much as people make mistakes or lie in everyday life. But we cannot produce a general principle for identifying such things, particularly not through warnings to be careful of “the contextual method of interpretation.”

And so to another of Gellner's disclaimers: “To say all this is not to argue for a scepticism or agnosticism concerning what members of alien languages mean, still less to argue for an abstention from the contextual method of interpretation. (On the contrary, I shall argue for a fuller use of it, fuller in the sense of allowing for the possibility that what people mean is sometimes absurd.)” (39).

But before that is done, we are given further examples of the tolerance-engendering contextual method at work in Leach's *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. Thus, according to Leach, Kachin statements about the supernatural world are “in the last analysis, nothing more than ways of describing the formal relationships that exist between real persons and real groups in ordinary Kachin society” (quoted on p. 40). At this point, Gellner intervenes: “It is possible to discern what has happened. Leach's exegetic procedures have also saved the Kachins from being credited with what they *appear* to be saying” and thus make it possible “to attribute meaning to assertions which might otherwise be found to lack it” (41). Gellner goes on to insist that he is not concerned to dispute Leach's interpretations, but merely “to show how the range of context, and the manner in which the context is seen, necessarily affect the interpretation” (41). This is a significant remark, because it is indeed not Leach's reductionism to which Gellner objects (we shall find him insisting on it himself later in connection with Berber religious ideology) but to the fact that this example of reduc-

tionism, which Gellner misleadingly calls “contextualism”—seems to defend, rather than to criticize, the discourse concerned.

Gellner’s demonstration of how “the *uncharitable* may be ‘contextualist’ in the second, deeper and better sense” (42) begins by presenting a fictitious word in a fictitious society—the word *boble*, used in a way remarkably like the English word *noble*. Thus, we are told that it can be applied to people who actually display certain habitual forms of conduct, as well as to people who occupy a particular social status irrespective of their behavior. “But the point is: the society in question does not distinguish *two concepts*, boble (a) and boble (b). It only uses the word boble tout court” (42). The logic of bobility is then analyzed further to show how

bobility is a conceptual device by which the privileged class of the society in question acquires some of the prestige of certain virtues respected in that society, without the inconvenience of needing to practice it, thanks to the fact that the same word is applied either to practitioners of those virtues or to occupiers of favoured positions. It is, at the same time, a manner of reinforcing the appeal of those virtues, by associating them, through the use of the same appellation, with prestige and power. But all this needs to be said, and to say it is to bring out the internal logical incoherence of the concept—an incoherence which, indeed, is socially functional. (42)

In fact, the concept of “bobility” is not shown to be incoherent, even if it be accepted that the ambiguity of the *word* allows it to be used in political discourse to consolidate the legitimacy of a ruling class (and therefore, in principle, also to undermine that legitimacy). Gellner’s conclusion to his fictional example is surely far too hasty: “What this shows, however, is that the over-charitable interpreter, determined to defend the concepts he is investigating from the charge of logical incoherence, is bound to misdescribe the social situation. *To make sense of the concept is to make nonsense of the society*” (42; emphasis added). Clearly, the word “bobility” makes sense to its users in particular statements (or they would not use it), and it makes sense also, although of a different kind, to Gellner, who states that by deceiving its users it somehow upholds a social structure. Sense or nonsense, like truth or falsehood, applies to *statements* and not to abstract concepts. There seems to me no evidence here of a nonsensical concept, because there

is no analysis of socially situated statements in which that concept is deployed.

But there is also a more important failure evident in this example: the lack of any attempt to explore its *coherence*—that which makes its social effect such a powerful possibility. Of course, political discourse employs lies, half-truths, logical trickery, and so on. Yet that is not what gives it its compulsive character—any more than the use of true or clear statements does—and compulsiveness is precisely what is involved in Gellner's example. It is not the abstract logical status of concepts that is relevant here, but the way in which a specific political (or religious) discourse that employs them seems to mobilize or direct the behavior of people within given situations. The compulsiveness of "bobility" as a political concept is a feature not of gullible minds but of coherent discourses and practices. That is why it is essential for a translator of powerful political or religious ideologies to attempt to convey something of this coherence. To make nonsense of the concept is to make nonsense of the society.

Gellner's final example comes from his own fieldwork among the central Moroccan Berbers, and is intended to clinch the argument that an uncharitable contextualist makes better sense of the society he describes by emphasizing the incoherence of its concepts. "Two concepts are relevant," he writes, "*baraka* and *agurram* (pl. *igurramen*). *Baraka* is a word which can mean simply 'enough,' but it also means plenitude, and above all blessedness manifested amongst other things in prosperity and the power to cause prosperity in others by supernatural means. An *agurram* is a possessor of *baraka*" (43).

Igurramen—translated as "saints" in Gellner's later writings (e.g., 1969)—are a fairly privileged and influential minority in the tribal society of central Moroccan Berbers who act as foci of religious values and also as mediators and arbitrators amongst the tribal population with whom they live. "The local belief is that they are selected by God. Moreover, God makes his choice manifest by endowing those whom he has selected with certain characteristics, including magical powers, and great generosity, prosperity, a consider-the-lilies attitude, pacifism, and so forth" (43).

This is Gellner's translation. But his too-fluent use of a religious vocabulary with strong, and perhaps irrelevant, Christian overtones must prompt doubts and questions at this point. What, precisely, are

the behaviors and discourses translated here as "a consider-the-lilies attitude," "makes his choice manifest," and "endowing," for instance? Do the Berbers believe that God *endows* their "saints" with dispositional characteristics such as "great generosity" and "pacifism," or do they take it, rather, that these characteristics are *conditions* of saintliness, of the closeness of *igurramen* to God? Do the Berbers really behave as though religious and moral virtues were manifestations of divine choice? What do they say and how do they behave when people fail to display the virtues they *ought* to have? By whom is an *agurram*'s behavior conceptualized as a consider-the-lilies attitude, given that he has both family and property, and that this fact is taken by the Berbers to be perfectly in order? Gellner does not give the reader the relevant evidence for answering these important questions, whose significance for his translation will emerge in a moment.

The reality of the situation is, however, that the *igurramen* are in fact selected by the surrounding ordinary tribesmen who use their services, by being called to perform those services and being preferred to the rival candidates for their performance. What appears to be *vox Dei* is in reality *vox populi*. Moreover, the matter of the blessed characteristics, the stigmata [*sic*] of *agurram*-hood is more complicated. It is essential that successful candidates to *agurram* status be *credited* with these characteristics, but it is equally essential at any rate with regard to some of them, that they should not really possess them. For instance, an *agurram* who was extremely generous in a consider-the-lilies spirit would soon be impoverished and, as such, fail by another crucial test, that of prosperity.

There is here a crucial divergence between concept and reality, a divergence which moreover is quite essential for the working of the social system. (43-44)

It is not at all clear from the account given by Gellner what is meant by the statement, "The local belief is that they are selected by God"—selected for what, exactly? For being arbitrators? But arbitration must be initiated by one or another member of the tribal society, and that fact can hardly be unknown to the tribesmen. For being pacific? But pacifism is a virtue, not a reward. For worldly success and prosperity? But that cannot be a local definition of saintliness, or the French colonial rulers would have been regarded as more saintly than any *agurram*.

It is really no great explanatory achievement for a European anthropologist to inform his agnostic and/or modern European readers that the Berbers believe in a particular kind of direct intervention of the deity in their affairs; that they are, of course, mistaken in this belief; and that this mistaken belief can have social consequences. In this kind of exercise, modern readers do not learn what the Berber tribesmen believe, only that what they believe is wrong: thus, the Berbers believe that God "selects" *igurramen*; we know God does not exist (or if some of us still believe he does, we know he does not intervene directly in secular history); ergo, the selector must be another agent whom the tribesmen do not know as the agent—in fact, the surrounding tribesmen themselves. The *igurramen* are selected (for a particular social role? for a moral virtue? for a religious destiny?) by the people. The selection appears to be *vox Dei* and is in reality *vox populi*. Or is it?

In reality, the social process described by the anthropologist as "selection" is the locus of a *vox* only if it is pretended that that process constitutes a cultural text. For a text must have an author—the one who makes his voice heard through it. And if that voice cannot be God's, it must be someone else's—the people's. Thus, Gellner insists on answering a theological question: Who is it that speaks through history, through society, through culture? In this particular case, the answer depends on the text containing at once the "real," unconscious meaning and its appropriate translation. This fusion of signifier and signified is especially evident in the way in which the Islamic concept of *baraka* is made to sound remarkably like the Christian concept of grace as portrayed by an eighteenth-century skeptic, so that the conditions defining the *agurram's baraka* are referred to with a knowing Gibbonian smile as "stigmata"—and by that deft sign, a portion of the Berber cultural text is at once constructed (made up) and designated (shown up) within Gellner's text, as exquisite a union of word and thing as any to be found in all his writings.

But society is not a text that communicates itself to the skilled reader. It is people who speak. And the ultimate meaning of what they say does not reside in society—society is the historical condition in which speakers act and are acted upon, speak, hear, and overhear. The privileged position that the anthropologist accords himself for decoding the *real* meaning of what the Berbers say (regardless of what they think they say) can be maintained only by someone who supposes that

translating other cultures is essentially a matter of matching written sentences in two languages, such that the second set of sentences becomes the "real meaning" of the first—an operation he alone controls, from field notebook to printed ethnography. In other words, it is the privileged position of someone who does not, and can afford not to, engage in a genuine dialogue with those he or she once lived with and now writes about (cf. Asad 1973, 17).

In the middle of his article, when discussing anthropological relativism, Gellner complains that "anthropologists were relativistic, tolerant, contextually-comprehending vis-à-vis the savages who are after all some distance away, but absolutistic, intolerant vis-à-vis their immediate neighbours or predecessors, the members of our own society who do not share their comprehending outlook and are themselves 'ethnocentric'" (31).

Why have I tried to insist that anyone concerned with translating from other cultures must look for coherence in discourses, and yet devoted so many pages to showing that Gellner's text is largely incoherent? The reason is quite simple: Gellner and I speak the same language, belong to the same academic profession, live in the same society. In taking up a critical stance toward his text I am contesting what he says, not translating it, and the radical difference between these two activities is precisely what I insist on. Still, the purpose of my argument is not to express an attitude of intolerance toward an immediate neighbor but to try to identify incoherencies in his text that call for remedy, because the anthropological task of translation deserves to be made more coherent. The purpose of this criticism, therefore, is to further a collective endeavor. Criticizing "savages who are after all some distance away," in an ethnographic monograph they cannot read, does not seem to me to have the same kind of purpose. In order for criticism to be responsible, it must always be addressed to someone who can contest it.²

2. Does my condition for responsible criticism make it impossible to criticize one's historical ancestors, since they are, after all, in no position to answer back? I do not think so. Criticism of past authors is, in an important sense, criticism of present authorities. Arguments about our intellectual, moral, and political heritage are really carried on with contemporaries, not with deceased ancestors. Disagreement with traditional discourses and practices is not really an engagement with past figures, but only with their authoritative reception in the present.

The Inequality of Languages

A careful reading of Gellner's paper shows that although he raises a number of important questions, he not only fails to answer them but misses some of the most crucial aspects of the problem with which the ethnographer is engaged. The most interesting of these, it seems to me, is the problem of what one might call "unequal languages"—and it is this I want now to discuss in some detail.

All good translation seeks to reproduce the structure of an alien discourse within the translator's own language. How that structure (or "coherence") is reproduced will, of course, depend on the genre concerned (poetry, scientific analysis, narrative, etc.) and on the resources of the translator's language, as well as on the interests of the translator and/or her readership. All successful translation is premised on the fact that it is addressed within a specific language, and therefore also to a specific set of practices, a specific form of life. The further that form of life is from the original, the less mechanical is the reproduction. As Walter Benjamin wrote: "The language of a translation can—in fact must—let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*" (1969, 79). It is, incidentally, for the reader to evaluate that *intentio*, not for the translator to preempt the evaluation. A good translation should always precede a critique. And we can turn this around by saying that a good critique is always an internal critique—that is, one based on some shared understanding, on a joint life, which it aims to enlarge and make more coherent. Such a critique—no less than the object of criticism—is a point of view, a (contra) *version*, having only provisional and limited authority.

What happens when the languages concerned are so disparate that it is very difficult to rewrite a harmonious *intentio*? Rudolf Pannwitz, quoted in the Benjamin essay on which I have just drawn, makes the following observation:

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works. The basic error of the translator is that he

preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. (1969, 80-81)

This call to transform a language, in order to translate the coherence of the original, poses an interesting challenge to the person satisfied with an absurd-sounding translation on the assumption that the original must have been equally absurd: the good translator does not immediately assume that unusual difficulty in conveying the sense of an alien discourse denotes a fault in the latter, but instead critically examines the normal state of his or her own language. The relevant question therefore is not how tolerant an attitude the translator ought to display toward the original author (an abstract ethical dilemma) but how she can test the tolerance of her own language for assuming unaccustomed forms.

But this pushing beyond the limits of one's habitual usages, this breaking down and reshaping of one's own language through the process of translation, is never an easy business, in part because it depends on the willingness of the translator's language to subject itself to this transforming power. I attribute, somewhat fictitiously, volition to the language because I want to emphasize that the matter is largely something the translator cannot determine by individual activity (any more than the individual speaker can affect the evolution of his or her language)—that it is governed by institutionally defined power relations between the languages and modes of life concerned. To put it crudely, because the languages of third world societies—including, of course, the societies that social anthropologists have traditionally studied—are seen as weaker in relation to Western languages (and today, especially to English), they are more likely to submit to forcible transformation in the translation process than the other way around. The reason for this is, first, that in their political-economic relations with third world countries, Western nations have the greater ability to manipulate the latter. And, second, Western languages produce and deploy desired knowledge more readily than third world languages do. (The knowledge that third world languages deploy more easily is not

sought by Western societies in quite the same way, or for the same reason.)

Take modern Arabic as an example. Since the early nineteenth century, there has been a growing volume of material translated from European languages—especially French and English—into Arabic. This includes scientific texts as well as social science, history, philosophy, and literature. And from the nineteenth century, Arabic as a language has begun as a result to undergo a transformation (lexical, grammatical, semantic) that is far more radical than anything to be identified in European languages—a transformation that has pushed it to approximate to the latter more closely than in the past.³ Such transformations signal inequalities in the power (i.e., in the capacities) of the respective languages in relation to the dominant forms of discourse that have been and are still being translated. There are varieties of knowledge to be learnt, but also a host of models to be imitated and reproduced. In some cases, knowledge of these models is a precondition for the production of more knowledge; in others, it is an end in itself, a mimetic gesture of power, an expression of desire for transformation. A recognition of this well-known fact reminds us that industrial capitalism transforms not only modes of production but also kinds of knowledge and styles of life in the third world (and with them, forms of language). The result of half-transformed styles of life will make for ambi-

3. "These changes in modern written Arabic include important innovations acquired from modern European languages—ranging from the use of punctuation, paragraphing, sub-headings, to new sentence structures, semantic elements, and literary styles. These changes have not yet been thoroughly studied, and such studies as there are concentrate entirely on lexical and stylistic developments. For example there is a well-known study (Stetkevych 1970) which classifies and exemplifies the following types of change: (1) stylistic borrowings affecting syntactic structure, (2) literal translations from Western languages with eventual disregard of existing Arabic equivalents, (3) stylistic borrowings made possible through semantic extension and abstraction, (4) assimilation of proverbial and idiomatic expressions. But so far as we are aware nothing has been done on the conceptual implications of having adopted European typographical conventions.

"We want to make it clear that we do not regard linguistic borrowings—like those . . . in the literary Arabic just referred to—as something to be deplored. On the contrary, some kind of accommodation is often essential to the well-being of the populations concerned. We wish simply to underline the obvious but very important fact that such changes tend to take place in a determinate direction, and that this clearly has to do with the political and economic inequalities between societies. There is, for example, no list of modifications in English or in French deriving from their reception of translations from the Arabic, comparable to the one we have mentioned for the latter language" (Asad and Dixon 1985, 172).

guities,⁴ which an unskillful Western translator may simplify in the direction of his own supposedly strong language.

What does this argument imply for the anthropologist engaged in translation? It contains a warning that perhaps there is a greater stiffness in ethnographic linguistic conventions, a greater intrinsic resistance than can be overcome by individual experiments in modes of ethnographic representation.

In his perceptive essay "Modes of Thought," which Gellner criticizes for making overcharitable assumptions about the coherence of so-called primitive thought, Lienhardt says:

When we live with savages and speak their languages, learning to represent their experience to ourselves in their way, we come as near to thinking like them as we can without ceasing to be ourselves. Eventually, we try to represent their conceptions systematically in the logical constructs we have been brought up to use; and we hope, at best, thus to reconcile what can be expressed in their languages, with what can be expressed in ours. We mediate between their habits of thought, which we have acquired with them, and those of our own society; in doing so, it is not finally some mysterious "primitive philosophy" that we are exploring, but the further potentialities of our thought and language. (1954, 96-97)

In the field, as Lienhardt rightly suggests, the process of translation takes place at the very moment the ethnographer engages with a specific mode of life—just as a child does in learning to grow up within a specific culture. He learns to find his way in a new environment and a new language. And, like a child (or a convert), he needs to verbalize explicitly what the proper way of doing things is, because that is how learning proceeds (cf. A. R. Luria on "synpraxic speech," in Luria and Yudovich 1971, 50). When the child (or the anthropologist) becomes adept at adult ways, what he has learnt becomes implicit, as assumptions informing a shared mode of life that aspires to coherence but always contains areas of unclarity.

But learning to live a new mode of life is not the same as learning

4. I use the teleological term *half-transformed* in order to stress that modernizing states (as well as modern Western states and international agencies) actively encourage—when they do not try to impose—a specific project of change in the third world: a particular kind of economy, politics, law, etc.

about another mode of life. When anthropologists return to their countries, they must write up "their people," and they must do so in the conventions of representation already circumscribed (already written around, bounded) by their discipline, institutional life, and wider society. Cultural translation must accommodate itself to a different language, not only in the sense of English as opposed to Dinka, or English as opposed to Kabbashi Arabic, but also in the sense of a British, middle-class, academic game as opposed to the modes of life of the nomadic, tribal Sudan. The stiffness of a powerful, established structure of life, with its own discursive games, its own strong languages, is what among other things finally determines the effectiveness of the translations. The translation is addressed to a very specific audience, which is waiting to read about another mode of life and to manipulate the text it reads according to established rules, not to learn to live a new way of life.

If Benjamin was right in proposing that translation may require not a mechanical reproduction of the original but a harmonization with its *intentio*, it follows that there is no reason why this should be done only in the same mode. Indeed, it could be argued that translating an alien form of life, another culture, is not always best done through the representational discourse of ethnography—that under certain conditions a dramatic performance, the execution of a dance, or the playing of a piece of music might be more apt. These would all be productions of the original and not mere interpretations: transformed instances of the original, not authoritative textual representations of it (cf. Hollander 1959). As such, they could become part of our living heritage and not merely of our social science. But would they be thought of by most social anthropologists as valid exercises in the translation of culture? I think not, because they all raise an entirely different dimension of the relationship between the anthropological work and its audience, the question of different uses (practices), as opposed merely to different writings and readings (meanings) of that work. And, as social anthropologists, we are trained to translate other discourses as cultural texts, not to introduce or enlarge cultural capacities, learnt from other ways of living, into our own. It seems to me very likely that the notion of culture as text has reinforced this view of our task, because it facilitates the assumption that translation is essentially a matter of verbal representation in the domain of social science.

Reading Other Cultures

This inequality in the power of languages, together with the fact that the anthropologist typically writes about an illiterate (or at any rate not an English-speaking) population for a largely academic, English-speaking audience, encourages a tendency I would now like to discuss: the tendency to read the implicit in alien cultures.

According to many social anthropologists, the object of ethnographic translation is not the historically situated speech (that is the task of the folklorist or the linguist) but "culture," and to translate culture the anthropologist must first read and then reinscribe the implicit meanings that lie beneath/within/beyond situated speech. Mary Douglas puts this nicely:

The anthropologist who draws out the whole scheme of the cosmos which is implied in [the observed] practices does the primitive culture great violence if he seems to present the cosmology as a systematic philosophy subscribed to consciously by individuals. . . . So the primitive world view which I have defined above is rarely itself an object of contemplation and speculation in the primitive culture. It has evolved as the appanage of other social institutions. To this extent it is produced indirectly, and to this extent the primitive culture must be taken to be unaware of itself, unconscious of its own conditions. (1966, 91)

One difference between the anthropologist and the linguist in the matter of translation is perhaps this: that whereas the latter is immediately faced with a specific piece of discourse produced within the society studied, a discourse that is then textualized, the former must construct the discourse as a cultural text in terms of meanings implicit in a range of practices. The construction of "cultural discourse" and its translation thus seem to be facets of a single act. This point is brought out in Douglas's comments on her own translations of the meanings of the pangolin cult among the Lele:

There are no Lele books of theology or philosophy to state the meaning of the cult. The metaphysical implications have not been expressed to me in so many words by Lele, nor did I even eavesdrop a conversation between diviners covering this ground. . . .

What kind of evidence for the meaning of this cult, or of any cult, can be sensibly demanded? It can have many different levels and kinds

of meaning. But the one on which I ground my arguments is the meaning which emerges out of a pattern in which the parts can incontestably be shown to be regularly related. No one member of the society is necessarily aware of the whole pattern, any more than speakers are able to be explicit about the linguistic patterns they employ. (1966, 173-74)

I have suggested elsewhere that the attribution of implicit meanings to an alien practice regardless of whether they are acknowledged by its agents is a characteristic form of theological exercise, with an ancient history. Here I want to note that reference to the linguistic patterns produced by speakers does not make a good analogy for unconscious cultural meanings because linguistic patterns are not meanings to be translated, they are rules to be systematically described and analyzed. A native speaker is aware of how such patterns should be produced, even when he cannot explicitly verbalize that knowledge in the form of rules. The apparent lack of ability to verbalize such social knowledge does not necessarily constitute evidence of unconscious meanings (cf. Dummett 1981). The concept of unconscious meaning belongs to a theory of the repressive unconscious, such as Freud's, in which a person may be said to know something unconsciously.

The business of identifying unconscious meanings in the task of cultural translation is therefore perhaps better compared to the activity of the psychoanalyst than to that of the linguist. Indeed, British anthropologists have sometimes presented their work in precisely these terms. Thus, David Pocock, a pupil of Evans-Pritchard's, writes:

In short, the work of the social anthropologist may be regarded as a highly complex act of translation in which author and translator collaborate. A more precise analogy is that of the relation between the psychoanalyst and his subject. The analyst enters the private world of his subject in order to learn the grammar of his private language. If the analysis goes no further it is no different in kind from the understanding which may exist between any two people who know each other well. It becomes scientific to the extent that the private language of intimate understanding is translated into a public language, however specialized from the layman's point of view, which in this case is the language of psychologists. But the particular act of translation does not distort the private experience of the subject and ideally it is, at least potentially, acceptable to him as a scientific representa-

tion of it. Similarly, the model of Nuer political life which emerges in Professor Evans-Pritchard's work is a scientific model meaningful to his fellow sociologists as sociologists, and it is effective because it is *potentially acceptable to the Nuer in some ideal situation in which they could be supposed to be interested in themselves as men living in society*. The collaboration of natural scientists may from this point of view be seen as developing language enabling certain people to communicate with increasing subtlety about a distinct area of natural phenomena which is defined by the name of the particular science. Their science is, in the literal meaning of the term, their common sense, their common meaning. To move from this common sense to the "common sense" of the wider public involves again an act of translation. The situation of social anthropology, or sociology in general, is not at this level so very different. The difference lies in the fact that sociological phenomena are objectively studied only to the extent that their subjective meaning is taken into account and that the people studied are potentially capable of sharing the sociological consciousness that the sociologist has of them. (1961, 88-89; emphasis added)

I have quoted this remarkable passage in full because it states very lucidly a position that is, I think, broadly acceptable to many anthropologists who would otherwise consider themselves to be engaged in very different kinds of enterprise. I have quoted it also because the nature of the collaboration between "author and translator" is neatly brought out in the subsequent reference to the psychoanalyst as scientist: if the anthropological translator, like the analyst, has final authority in determining the subject's meanings, it is then the former who becomes *the real author* of the latter. In this view, cultural translation is a matter of determining implicit meanings—not the meanings the native speaker actually acknowledges in his speech, not even the meanings the native listener necessarily accepts, but those he is "potentially capable of sharing" with scientific authority "in some ideal situation": it is when he can say, for example, with Gellner, that *vox Dei* is in reality *vox populi*, that he utters the true meaning of his traditional discourse, an essential meaning of his culture. The fact that in that "ideal situation" he would no longer be a Muslim Berber tribesman, but someone coming to resemble Professor Gellner, does not appear to worry such cultural translators.

This power to create meanings for a subject through the notion of

the implicit or of the unconscious, to authorize them, has of course been discussed for the analyst-analysand relationship (e.g., in Malcolm 1982). It has not, to my knowledge, been considered with regard to what the cultural translator does. There are, of course, important differences in the case of the anthropologist. Because the latter does not impose his translation on the members of the society whose cultural discourse he unravels, his ethnography is not authoritative in the way the analyst's case study is. The analysand comes to the analyst, or is referred to the latter by those with authority over him, as a patient in need of help. The anthropologist, by contrast, comes to the society he wants to read; he sees himself as a learner, not as a guide, and he withdraws from the society when he has adequate information to inscribe its culture. He does not consider the society, and neither do its members consider themselves to be, sick: the society is never subject to the anthropologist's authority.

But this argument is not quite as conclusive as it may seem at first sight. It remains the case that (a) the ethnographer's translation/representation of a particular culture is inevitably a textual construct, that (b) as representation it cannot normally be contested by the people to whom it is attributed, and that (c) as a "scientific text" it eventually becomes a privileged element in the potential store of historical memory for the nonliterate society concerned. In modern and modernizing societies, inscribed records have a greater power to shape, to reform, selves and institutions than folk memories do. They even construct folk memories. The anthropologist's monograph may return, retranslated, into a "weaker" third world language. In the long run, therefore, it is not the personal authority of the ethnographer but the social authority of his ethnography that matters. And that authority is inscribed in the institutionalized forces of industrial capitalist society, which are constantly tending to push the meanings of various third world societies in a single direction. This is not to say that there is no resistance to this tendency. But resistance in itself indicates the presence of a dominant force.

I must stress that I am not arguing that ethnography plays any great role in the reformation of other cultures. In this respect, the effects of ethnography cannot be compared with some other forms of representing societies—for example, television films produced in the West that are sold to third world countries. (That anthropologists recognize the power of television is reflected, incidentally, in the in-

creasing number of anthropological films being made for the medium in Britain.) Still less can the effects of ethnography compare with the political, economic, and military constraints of the world system. My point is only that the process of cultural translation is inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power—professional, national, international. And among these conditions is the authority of ethnographers (a) to present the coherence of culturally distinctive discourses as the integration of self-contained social systems, and (b) to uncover the implicit meanings of subordinated cultural discourses. Given that that is so, the interesting question is not whether, and if so to what extent, anthropologists should be relativists or rationalists, critical or charitable, toward other cultures, but how power enters into the process of cultural translation, seen both as a discursive and as a nondiscursive practice.

Conclusion

For some years I have been exercised by this puzzle. How is it that the approach exemplified by Gellner's paper remains attractive to so many academics in spite of its being demonstrably faulty? Is it perhaps because they are intimidated by a style? We know, of course, that anthropologists, like other academics, learn not merely to use a scholarly language but to fear it, to admire it, to be captivated by it. Yet this does not quite answer the question because it does not tell us why such a scholarly style should capture so many intelligent people. I now put forward this tentative solution. What we have here is a style easy to teach, to learn, and to reproduce (in examination answers, assessment essays, and dissertations). It is a style that facilitates the textualization of other cultures, that encourages the construction of diagrammatic answers to complex social and historical questions, and that is well suited to arranging foreign concepts in clearly marked heaps of sense or nonsense. Apart from being easy to teach and to imitate, this style promises visible results that can readily be graded. Such a style must surely be at a premium in an established university discipline that aspires to standards of scientific objectivity. Is not the popularity of this style, then, a reflection of the kind of pedagogic institution we inhabit?

Although it is now many years since Gellner's paper was first published, it represents a doctrinal position that is still popular. I have in mind the sociologism according to which religious ideologies are said

to get their real meaning from the political or economic structure, and the self-confirming methodology according to which this reductive semantic principle is evident to the (authoritative) anthropologist and not to the people being written about. This position therefore assumes that it is not only possible but necessary for the anthropologist to act as translator and critic at one and the same time. I regard this position as untenable, and think that it is relations and practices of power that give it a measure of viability. (For a critical discussion of this position as it relates to Islamic history, see Asad 1980.)

The positive point I have tried to make in the course of my interrogation of Gellner's text has to do with what I have called the inequality of languages. The inequality of languages is a feature of the global patterns of power created by modern imperialism and capitalism. I have proposed that the anthropological enterprise of translation may be vitiated by the fact that there are asymmetrical tendencies and pressures in the languages of dominated and dominant societies. And I have suggested that anthropologists need to explore these processes in order to determine how far they go in defining the possibilities and the limits of effective translation. My argument is directed against the assumption that translation requires the adjustment of "foreign" discourses to their new site. In my view, they should retain what may be a discomforting—even scandalous—presence within the receiving language.