

Before the Classroom. Translation as Internship

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Prima della lezione. La traduzione come tirocinio

What are the problems that teaching encounters today? In what way today is teaching spoken of? The words that speak of the school today, which words are they and where do they come from? What rationality more generally informs them? The Essay tries to answer these questions by employing a critical-theoretical perspective. Starting from the presupposition that teaching has principally to do with the knowledges deposited in the disciplinary contents, the first step, following Lyotard, considers the conditions of knowledge in the more developed societies, examining in particular what knowledge is expected to be and who takes this decision. Then the Essay moves further critically examining the hegemonic advent of neo-liberalism and the paradigmatic horizon of connections and economical-political presuppositions that follows. The analysis continues by focusing on the words that characterize the Neo-Language that today insists on education and teaching, proposing the practice of a ‘foreignizing’ translation as a premise to rethink the emancipatory education.

Quali sono i problemi che incontra l’insegnare oggi? In quale modo è detto e nominato? Le parole che dicono la scuola quali parole sono e da dove vengono? Quale razionalità, più in generale, le informa? Il Saggio tenta di rispondere a queste domande adottando una prospettiva teorico-critica. Partendo dal presupposto che insegnare è sempre insegnare qualcosa, ossia in primis i contenuti conoscitivi relativi alla cultura umanistica e scientifica, il primo passaggio riguarda l’esame dello statuto del sapere e della conoscenza nell’età postindustriale, in particolare che cosa è stabilito esso debba essere e chi lo ha stabilito. Il Saggio prosegue con l’esame critico dell’avvento e della parabola dell’egemonia economico-politica neoliberale come sistema paradigmatico globale e delle conseguenze scolastico-educative che esso comporta. Tenendo conto di questo orizzonte di connessioni e di presupposti, l’analisi si concentra sulle parole che caratterizzano la neo-lingua che oggi insiste sui mondi dell’educazione e della didattica, proponendo la pratica della traduzione defamiliarizzante come premessa indispensabile per ripensare fondamenti e vocabolario della pedagogia emancipativa.

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1. Transferring (*tramandare*), translating (*tradurre*), betraying (*tradire*): We should use many ways to speak of teaching

It doesn't seem risky to state that *something* is always being taught. In different ways and finalities, with different degrees of awareness and intentionality. The need to transmit knowledge and ability and the need to acquire them seem to be constants in the human condition. If this is true, the acts of teaching and instruction that end up producing themselves, cannot be relegated to being mere accessory phenomena to every social asset in any historical era that seeks to preserve itself and to endure. Something passes and must pass from one generation to another as a condition of continuity, persistence, or even just survival. This transferring is anything but obvious, peaceful, and linear. The concern that the elements of our civilization, however isolated, rudimentary, or still in a nascent state, can be preserved by opening themselves up at the same time to their own becoming (progressive or conservative as that may be), leads us to the idea that teaching as an act, in the first instance and without reducing it to this, aimed at transmitting and transferring. And therefore, crossing the semantic affinity between the words, even inevitably to betray (*tradire*) that which is transferred (*tramandato*), if we mean by this the act of teaching as a translation (*traduzione*). That means that teaching meant in the pure sense of transmitting, as a faithful replica or as a copy that conforms to a pre-established canon, is an enterprise that is as arduous as it is senseless. Not only because the semantic areas of betrayal and translation are not so distant from that of tradition, but because of the reductive effects of meaning on the activity of teaching that this operation brings with it.

Teaching brings however always with itself, and in the relations between teachers and students, the co-presence of perturbations, of progressive slips in the meanings attributed to contents, that describe its own volume of meaning. The teacher's desk, furthermore, always runs the risk of being a trap or a tranquillizer. Teaching is always on the brink of crossing a subtle threshold, both for invading and destroying and for opening wide new experiences and emancipating life possibilities. Or, we can add, it can also be subtly invited, by the "extra-pedagogical reality" (Adorno, 2010) and by the economic-political power that characterize it, to adopt a cynical didactic style because it is solely determined by the utilitarian ends of the short-term and the short-range, linked to the chain of value as the sole horizon of legitimation.

It is useful now to enter in the life of our argumentation, on the basis of this premise. A first question. What are the problems that teaching encounters today? For we can speak of teaching and of instruction in many ways. Better yet: we could and we must speak of them in many ways as a pedagogic and political antidote to the *reductio ad unum*, that is always looming, in the didactic discourse. We can affirm that the pluralism of the didactic model can be considered as an indicator of the state of good health of a democratic society (and it would not be only one indicator among others). A sequence of tightly intertwined questions becomes then almost inevitable. In what way today is teaching spoken of? The words that speak of the school (and the university) today, which words are they and where do they come from? What rationality more generally informs them? Is it still possible to think of an alternative that is not just a variant internal to the politico-economic paradigm that is today hegemonic, that would therefore have the sole function of maintaining its lifespan by updating it?¹

2. Teaching *something*, today. The value form of knowledge

In deviating radically from the bizarre hypotheses today circulating that teaching has nothing to do with its content, these already being available on the Web, and claiming on the contrary that it has principally to do with the knowledges deposited in the disciplinary contents, we ask ourselves what are the rules of knowledge today, what has been established that it must be (and who established it), what is its condition of possibilities?

1. It is not our intention, throughout these pages, to reply in an exhaustive way to the questions posed, given the scope circumscribed by this essay that intends to limit itself to posing some preliminary problems to the treatment of the very ample theme, of questions linked to teaching today.

Liotard (1979) posted himself these same questions, all centered on the conditions of knowledge in the more developed societies. Knowledge changes by law, in its reading, in the moment in which the societies enter into the post-industrial era. He underlined the impacts of the technological transformations on the study of knowledge, on teaching, on its very nature. Or, miniaturization, standardization, commercialization, modifications of the operations of acquisition, of classification, of making available and circulating of knowledges which, he foretold, could circulate “only if translatable into quantities of information” (Liotard, 1979, p. 11). The acquisition of knowledge, he foresaw, would be separable from the “formation of the spirit” and from the formation of the personality (*Bildung*). The relationship between producers (researchers), suppliers (teachers), and consumers (students, etc...) will take the form of that which elapses between producers and consumers of a commodity, the “value form” (Liotard, 1979, p. 12). Knowledge will cease to be its own end, with its own intrinsic value, and will lose its “use-value,” it will become, in a Marxist sense, an “immediate productive force” (Marx, 1970, pp. 401–403); it will become, in its form as information-commodity, indispensable to the productive power and will be one of the key factors of global competition for power (Liotard, 1979, p. 14). The capacity of the French thinker for theoretical anticipation seems to leave little doubt. A proof of this evolution, already matured in its essential characteristics, can be found in a passage of the “Strategy of Lisbon” delineated by the European Union in recent times: “The Union has today set itself a new strategic goal for the next decade: *to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world*” (Strategy of Lisbon, 2000).

It is worth remembering that apropos the value form of knowledge Laval and others have recently written a nice volume published in 2010 entitled “*La nouvelle école capitaliste*.” This formula, “knowledge-based economy,” a formula ready-at-hand — what does it mean? An attempt to translate it could be this:² the economy provides the model for that which knowledge must be, knowledge as: “an income-generating information, an accumulation-able capital, an uninterrupted sequence of innovations and obsolescences” (Laval, *et al.*, 2010, p. 12). The same authors underline the double character of this new form of knowledge, which is found along two complementary logics, the logic of the innovation of research, and the logic of the competence of teaching. The de-legitimation of the speculative-emancipatory grand narratives has lost credibility over time, even as an effect of the primacy of means over ends. The weakening of the denotative discourse (true/false) and of the prescriptive discourse (just/unjust) to the advantage of the “performative” discourse (efficient/inefficient), has transformed the order of the pertinent questions. For which the structure of that which it became licit to ask (and ask oneself) is roughly this: does this single activity of teaching, does this single cultural content work or doesn’t it work, is it useful or isn’t it, does it makes its (however small) contribution to increasing the capacity to confront global economic competition? This is the case independently of its actual truth content and its justness. Values, these, are at stake, perhaps, in a second moment, and only after the answer about the contribution made to economic performativity has been a positive one. It is a question, therefore, wrote Lyotard prefiguring the times, “of teaching competence,” competence instead of ideals, “performative competences” (Liotard, 1979, p. 94). It is easy to arrive by these means to the sad qualification of the teacher adjunct to the “facilitation of the processes of learning.” A sort of Serafino Gubbio³ rookie, “classroom operator,” adjunct to monitoring and to the maintenance of the learning done in reality by the public in the classroom. The First Commandment of the New Didactic Testament: You will have no other teaching than that linked to the production of measurable learning linked to the performativity of economic competition. We have arrived at the accomplishing of the *learnification* of teaching (Biesta, 2017), which makes possible such objectification.

The crude framework just treated seems to join *à la lettre* with the coeval hegemonic rise of neo-liberal political economy, whose foundational principles and anthropotechnology (De Carolis, 2017) frame very well paradigmatically the Lyotardian lineaments here recalled. Having generalized the prin-

2. We mean here translation as an exercise in unmasking, with the goal of making this text say that which the text itself camouflages through ambiguous formulations and capacities for immediate fascination. The question of translating, today, will be reprised further on and the analysis deepened.

3. Serafino Gubbio is the protagonist of the novel by Luigi Pirandello “*The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio*”, which was published in excerpts in the “*New Anthology*” (1915). A fragment: “Are you really necessary? What are you? A hand that turns a crank. Couldn’t this hand do otherwise? Couldn’t it be abolished, replaced by some mechanism?” (p. 5).

principle of competition and of economic rivalry beyond their natural river bed (the real economy) to the point of involving every particle of social praxis including the entire cycle of learning, as well as the most intimate meanderings of subjectivity, business becomes the form of life *par excellence*. At this point it has ended up giving pedagogical value to an economic theory, institutionalizing it, despite the historical presence of rival theories. Neo-classical economic theory, it is worth remembering, has undergone two radical critiques, on the part of Keynes and of Sraffa, that did not impede it from becoming the hegemonic economic knowledge today, in a particular way, in the Academy and in the manuals (Lunghini, 2012). In place of social class as the object of analysis, as in political economy and in the Marxist critique, it has assumed the individual as the elementary object and starting point, mathematizing economic discourse and following the rules of methodological individualism.⁴ It has produced educative policies that correspond to it, and a pedagogy well-ensconced in the learning institutions.

3. Translation or subalternity

Words are not just words. *Language really matters*. We observe now the relationship between words, the thought that thinks them, and the things which the words refer to. It is evident that if I change words, I change the way I think about things. If I change the words related to teaching, introducing a new lexicon, I change the way I think about teaching as well as the teaching itself, in practicing it, so that it will not be the same as before. The nexus between knowledges, form of teaching and, let's add, democracy, seems to us to undergo (today but not starting today) a powerful shock whose dynamic is however subtle and astute. It needs, in order to be intelligible, a critical apparatus capable of going beyond surface effects opening cracks and fissures in the hegemonic discourse and in its order made up of myth-words (Barthes, 1957) *prêt-à-parler*. Human capital, competences, knowledge economy, *lifelong learning*, innovation of process, innovation of product, and so on.⁵ We add also inclusion and resilience.⁶ The former word, we try to hypothesize, replaces social justice, the latter replaces flexibility that in its own turn replaced resistance. The myth-words have among their other characteristics that of being de-politicizing (Barthes, 1957), of extinguishing conflict and dissent, discoloring political differences. The newspeak that insists on the school, the university, the didactic, research, little by little render obsolete the "arch language" (Orwell, 1949) that maintained and reproduced another vision of the world. The contraction of the lexicon, wrote Orwell, is not conceived to extend intellectual faculties but to reduce them: "The word FREE still existed in Newspeak, but it could only be used in such statements as 'This dog is free from lice' or 'This field is free from weeds'. It could not be used in its old sense of 'politically free' or 'intellectually free'" (Orwell, 1949, p. 377). The myth-word is a depoliticized word that transforms history in Nature, exercising a governmental action (Barthes, 1957) that disciplines the conduct of the instructors and the practice of teaching without a sovereign decision being necessary.

The task of those who still have it in their souls to give new life to the dormant critical tradition in the time of its paralysis, I believe regards first of all the urgency to rethink from top to bottom the emancipatory paradigm, restoring it on new bases after having denounced its discoloration and progressive adaptive neutralization. The impression is that the "propulsive push" of the emancipatory solutions of the 20th Century have exhausted their transformative capacities, and, for the most part, are subsumed by the neoliberal paradigm and by instances of neo-conservatives that love to present themselves in disguise, even democratic ones, and, *ca va sans dire*, as inclusive and resilient. The heresies of yesterday, for example those of Freire and don Milani, have become forms of *redwashing* of the orthodoxies of today,

4. According to methodological individualism, "scientific is only that explanation that begins from analysis of the behavior of single individuals...The problem of individual choices is in fact conceived and formulated as a mathematical problem of the maximization of an objective function, whose argument is utility. Each individual is characterized by a different utility function, and by individual solutions to maximization of utility are obtained the individual functions of supply and demand" (Lunghini, 2012, pp. 19–20).

5. A significant list of this neo-language can be found in Pring, 2001.

6. The term "resilience" is by now an integral part of the national and European bureaucratic *koiné*. The Latin "*resiliere*," we recall, means to bounce, jump backwards, back off, contract. The resilient subjects reacts to blow that they receive, withdrawing themselves, becoming meek. What does this means deposited in light of the etymology to interest the unconscious of power?

and the ignorant schoolmasters have by now become functionaries of the system that they think to be revolutionary.⁷

The first line of critical work for rethinking teaching today, I believe, is of a linguistic nature. Critique and dissent in the face of “newspeak” through which the new didactic world manifests itself, does not lead to a simple restoration of the “arch language” by now behind us, but leads to the imagining of a new conceptual vocabulary that allows us to say and to think otherwise about teaching, to practice it as an experience that persists in wanting to be educative. Not therefore, primarily, in the sense of mere functional adaptation to the present state of things with an eye to continually improving their economic profitability. The literary side of this process is exemplarily expressed in bourgeois modern prose and by their ever-fresh key words, among which coincidentally stand out especially “useful” and “efficient”⁸ (Moretti, 2017).

Our task, to begin with, given that *language really matters*, can be meant as the work of a *sui generis* translator, a translator that we can define as “de-familiarizing.” The translation “de-familiarizing” (Venuti, 1998), induces the readers and the poly-system to arrive at seeing afresh their own canons so as to include those minor systems (or simply other systems) through which another language forces them into discussion. The more a translation is able to show itself to be “foreignizing” with respect to the linguistic standards, the more it subverts the dominant system becoming a vehicle of changes, opposing itself therefore to both linguistic and ideological “familiarization.” Translation intended as cultural subversion, had a meaningful role during Fascism (Ferme, 2002, pp. 19–25). The translations of Pavese, for example did not adapt themselves to the standards of the language and the literature of arrival and aimed at putting into question the traditional expressions of the hegemonic group. Quite early on translations (his and those of others) began to alter the fascist literary and cultural poly-system subverting it linguistically and ideologically in a way unforeseen and uncontrollable from above. In our case, translation always regards the passage from one language to another but with a different intention: the language of the starting point is that of language become ordinary in the common sense of the world of the school, the language of arrival is that of its material meaning made intelligible, a premise for the re-semanticization of teaching.

The language of conservation presents itself to us as a language of change, of progress, of the new, transforming by enchantment every contrary discourse into a discourse that looks to the past, hostile to innovation, traditionalist, into a discourse whose arguments are slow and mechanical and outdated. The finality is this: adapting the young generations to the relationships and to the conditions of existing life as if these were relations and conditions of new life. The “capitalist society,” also in the current phase of accumulation, never presents itself in an original version, but also as already translated into its defensive rhetoric, never presents itself as such, but always in an “anonymous” form. It does not want to be named and so explained, but at most only found to be inevitable, despite itself seeing beyond the system of rhetorical and linguistic representations that keep it safe from indiscrete gazes. “Translate” then, means to put into practice an exercise in semiological subversion that seeks to bring the words to things that the words do not say. This exercise in imprudent re-naming is a practice of liberation and of self-education because it subtracts us, as thinking-speakers — and today’s teachers — from the process of assimilation to the poly-system of rhetorical meaning through which — hiding itself — the unnamable “new reason of the world” speaks. Liberation and self-education through the exercise of de-familiarizing translation. This task regards *in primis*, today, every teacher before their entry into the classroom. Maybe this could be the meaning of their professional internship.

7. The reference is to the work of Jacques Rancière (1991), *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.

8. In Defoe’s “*Robinson Crusoe*,” the first word is “useful.” “No object is an end in itself, but always and only a means for doing something else. A tool. And in a world of tools, there remains only one thing to do: work.” It is the first picture of the “bourgeois mentality.” *Zweckrationalität* (rationality governed by its scope and turned to it) as Weber called it, *Instrumentellen Vernunft*, as Horkheimer called it (Moretti, 2017, pp. 33–34).

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