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Translation as culture: The example of pictorial-verbal transposition in Sahagún's *primeros memoriales* and *codex florentino*

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Abstract: Many items of culture which are conveyed from one culture to another may take verbal form, and then constitute what Jakobson called “translation proper.” If such diffusions involve a co-occurrent change of semiotic systems, they are of such a different nature, that we better reserve another term for it: transposition. Whether or not accompanied by transpositions, such as pictures, translational events may play an important part in the encounter between cultures, not only in the negative sense of deformations as postulated by the Tartu school. Particularly, when such transpositions make up a massive occurrence, as was the assimilation of the Greek-Muslim heritage in Middle Age Europe, or the more extended process by means of which Europe took on of the experience of the so-called New World several centuries later, such processes may actually enrich the homeculture. In this paper, we will study the latter process, zeroing in on a single, if protracted, event, the creation of the work ascribed to Bernardino de Sahagún, which really involved the collaboration of many scholars, many of them bearers of Aztec culture, exclusively or in combination with Western culture. This case interests us in particular, also because it involved the transposition of pictures, not, in the sense, of Western pictures being substituted for single pre-Hispanic picture, but rather as a kind of semiotic means contributing in different ways to the process of constitution.

Keywords: cultural encounters, translation, picture use, Spanish conquest, total semiotic act

The translation of any text into another language is always an event taking place in the interspace between two cultures. Sometimes, transferring a text from one culture to another, without basically changing the language, as in the notorious (contemporary) case of Latin America and Spain, may encounter appreciable semiotic hinders. The transposition of meaning from one culture to another, whether it involves linguistic translation or not, always has to overcome many

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obstacles. When translation is not enough, and there must instead be (what we are going to call here) a transposition from one semiotic resources to another, the hurdles tower up. Nevertheless, it is misleading to think of translation and transposition events merely in terms of problems, as the Tartu school seems to do (notably in Lotman et al. 1975). In particular, when a sequence of such translation/transposition events has taken place during a relatively short time (from the point of view of those writing the historical accounts), the result of overcoming these obstacles has, at least sometimes, given rise to periods of creativity, which have changed the course of human history.

1 Translation as an event in history

In classical anthropological thought, there has long been an opposition between diffusionists, who think that all cultural ideas are created only once, within one culture, and then are spread to other cultures, and those who, on the contrary, think that ideas in culture may have multiple origins, often, as in the case of the classical evolutionists, in the sense of identical ideas re-emerging in different cultures as they reach a particular stage of development in the postulated chain of continuing progress. The opposition between these two strands has recently been tempered, since it was pointed out that, even to receive a particular cultural idea from one culture, the receiving culture must to some extent be prepared for the reception. Within the cultural semiotics of the Tartu school, the notion of cultural translation can be understood in this sense (see Lotman et al. 1975). Indeed, in this model, which separates Culture from Non-culture, the former includes a “mechanism of translation”, arguable because it must somehow possess the capacity to receive ideas from other cultures.

Curiously, the Tartu school has always conceived this mechanism as producing a kind of deformation of the ideas received (for an overview, see Lotman et al. 1975). Elsewhere, I have pointed out that this is an erroneous construal of the notion of translation, which is a double act of communication, involving, in the middle of the process a subject which is the addressee of the first and the addresser of the second act, whose goal it is to maintain as much constancy in the meaning as possible, given the difference between languages and, in particular, between different semiotic resources (see Sonesson 2014). One may of course retort that, in this case, the term translation is a misnomer, and what happens between one culture and another really is a distortion. It is interesting to realise that the same controversy has also occurred in the posterity of Bartlett’s (1967 [1932]) notion of scheme, as applied to experimental memory research, where, as Wagoner (2017)

has pointed out, what was meant by Bartlett to be a creative process of reconstruction has been down-graded to a simple procedure of distortion. Not only is one of the most famous items studied by Bartlett (1967 [1932]), “The war of worlds”, a case in which a story from one culture was recounted, and thus recreated, by members of another culture, but Bartlett’s (1923) first probe into social psychology was actually concerned with the mutual understanding of Western culture and what was, at that time, called “primitive culture.”

Even in historical time there have been great moments of translation from one culture to another, where, at least in the long run, what was translated was not only a series of books and other documents, but where the very content of one culture was, so to speak, transposed into another. One such moment no doubt took place when great amounts of Greek thinking was transferred into Muslim culture. Another, connected moment, occurred when all this thinking, supplemented by pieces gathered from the creative development it produced in Muslim countries, as well as by sources conveyed from Byzantine Empire and found hidden in European monasteries, was imported into Medieval European culture (see Gutas 1998; Goody 2004; Masood 2009; De Bellaigue 2017). The importance of this double exchange to the cognitive-semiotic history of humankind can hardly be overestimated (see Sonesson 2019a). In terms of the *Annales* school (Braudel 1958), this series of acts of translation must be characterised as not only being part and parcel of “l’histoire événementielle”, but as participating in the formation of conjectures and structures.

Nevertheless, there is at least another such moment which has had an immense cognitive-semiotic impact on European culture (including those cultures consequently being impacted by European culture, such as, notably Latin America), the discovery of what, at the time, was recognized as “the new world.” And it was certainly a new world, in the sense that there were no proper schemes of interpretation available for it, unlike the case of Asia and Africa, of which some remote tidings, certainly very much distorted, had been received over the centuries, in the form a persisting trade exchange, as well as Bible reading and (later on) the reading of the Greek and Roman classics. The term “the Columbian Exchange” has been used for the interchange of plants, animals, and maladies which took place between America and Europe (see Lewis and Maslin 2018: 158ff), but it could also be applied to the diffusion, in the two directions, of ideas particular to the different cultures involved.

O’Gorman (1958) has claimed that America was discovered, but invented, thus anticipating the more general remonstrance voiced more recently by Said (1995 [1978]). As Buruma and Margalit (2004) rightly observe, notwithstanding, the opposite is also true: “the Orient”, or those who feel entitled to speak in its name, have also invented “the Occident.” But, as Bartlett would no doubt have

pointed out, Orientalism is only the flip-side of Occidentalism. Indeed, terms like “conquest” and “discovery” are shifters, in the same sense as modernity, as I have pointed out elsewhere (see Sonesson 2016c): their meaning is determined by the here and now of the subject pronouncing them. So are, at the origin, the very notions of the Orient and the Occident, but their meanings have subsequently been reified through the course of history.

Taking our cues from the Tartu school, but spelling them out, we have argued that culture is always asymmetrically symmetric: that is, from the point of view of the culture in which we are, the other culture is always more or less part of non-culture; but, *mutatis mutandis*, the other culture takes the same, that is, the inverse, stand on this issue. In other words, Culture A takes an asymmetric view of Culture B; but so does Culture B with respect to Culture A. And in this double asymmetry consists the fundamental symmetry (see Sonesson 2000, Sonesson 2012). This explains that, in the Tartu school model, Culture is (almost) always where the ego is situated, looking out on Non-culture. Similarly, Husserl’s (1973) opposition between the *Homeworld* (Heimwelt) and the *Alienworld* (Fremdwelt) also takes for granted such an asymmetry (cf. Steinbock 2003: 296 ff; Sonesson 2016a, and Section 2 below).

History cannot be predicted, and, even after the fact, there can be no conclusive explanation of the present state merely by taking the cue from earlier historical states. Still, it seems difficult to imagine something like the discovery of the “new world”, with all the exchange of cultural ideas in both directions that this implied, without there having been the Greek-Muslim-European transposition of ideas in the first place, and the ideas of the Enlightenment, which still single out Western culture on the contemporary scene, could hardly have emerged, if these two major exchanges had not happened beforehand (see Sonesson 2016b). There is no denying the truth of the “black legend”, and of all the black actions which did not make it into legendary status. That, after all, is what has usually happened when different cultures meet, beginning in prehistory (see Guilaine and Zammit 2001; Keeley 1996; Patou-Mathis 2013; Scheidel 2017). When all is said and done, before the Spaniards enslaved the natives of ancient Mesoamerica, the Aztecs had been the imperialist rulers of that geographic domain. A few representatives of Western culture, nevertheless, learned the lessons of empathy and tolerance, which may not, as far as we know, have been true of other cultures. The most unambiguous results of this process of learning is the famous *Histoire des deux Indes* (Raynal 2007 [1770]) authored by Thomas Raynal, but co-written, in its ideologically essential parts, by Denis Diderot, in which slavery, colonialism and even capitalism are given their due (see Wolpe 1957; Duchet 1978).

Many writers, most of them Spanish monks, wrote histories of “the West Indies” and its conquest at the time (more or less) immediately following the latter

event. Among them, nevertheless, the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún (1499–1590) stands out in several ways, first, because he led a large-scale inquiry involving various groups of society, most of which were basically native Mexicans, and second, because, when it came to telling the story of the conquest, he asked the Mexicans themselves to give their version. For the first reason, he has been called the first anthropologist (Edmonson 1974; León-Portilla 1987). For the second reason, he must be considered the original initiator of those texts describing the conquest from the point of view of the objects, rather than the subjects, of this process, which have more recently become more generally known thanks to the books published by León-Portilla (1959) and Wachtel (1971), both bearing the title “the vision of the vanquished.” But, as we will see, the position of Sahagún was much more complex (and less benevolent) than this seems to indicate.

2 The encounter with the other culture

Elsewhere, I have sketched three main scenarios for the encounter between cultures (see Dunér and Sonesson 2016: 277ff). The first is that of *conquest*, when you install yourself, normally with a whole group coming from your Homeworld, in what was until now the Homeworld of other people, and attempt, for all practical purposes, to transform it into your own Homeworld (leaving perhaps a residue Homeworld for the population that was there before). The second one is that of *immigration*. In that case, you are normally forced by outer circumstances to give up your own Homeworld, and must try, at least to some extent, to integrate yourself into what was earlier the Homeworld of other populations, without being able to take over the governance of that Homeworld. The third scenario could be characterized as involving *the exchange of mates*, because, originally, you often had to leave your Homeworld at a certain moment of your life to find a marrying partner (or you may have chosen to do so), but today, this scenario could very well apply just as much to those who leave one culture for another for the sake of finding employment or some other economic outcome. In any case, without being at all easy living, this scenario is the one that has, in the historical experience of humanity, has turned out to hold the best chance of occasioning a real meeting of cultures, in the sense of not necessarily prejudging one part or another.¹

¹ These three scenarios, which were conceived to take care of the movement of people and their ideas, may not be the only ones relevant. Nevertheless, if we think of globalization as the kind of homogenization of culture caused by the spread of a number of big brands, the conquest scenario seems to be the most fitting.

To make sense of this, we will have recourse to a model, based originally on that of the Tartu school of cultural semiotics (Lotman et al. 1975), but which, in the end, can receive its foundation just as well in the division of the Lifeworld, the world taken for granted, made by Edmund Husserl, which opposes the Homeworld to the Alienworld. As a rectification to both Lotman et al. (1975) and Husserl (1973), nevertheless, I have suggested that this “foreign world” (Husserl’s *Fremdwelt*) needs to be divided into two domains, that of *Alius*, the other which we may speak about, but not interact with, and the *Alter*, with which we are, more or less, on speaking terms, including in this notion of speaking a diversity of semiotic resources. Very conveniently, in the present context, the difference between conceiving the other as *Alius* and *Alter* can be illustrated by the attitudes taken at the first encounter by Columbus and Cortés. Christopher Columbus is a good example of somebody conceiving the American continent as *Alius*, since he treated the people he encountered on a par with gold, species, and other material resources, whereas Hernán Cortés took the attitude of an *Alter*, since he addressed the natives as human beings, even if only to deceive them better. In conclusion, then, the *Homeworld* needs to be opposed both the an *Alienworld* and an *Alterworld*.

In the following I will present the Tartu model in the schematic form of two overlapping squares representing, their terms, Culture and Nature, respectively, which are connected by different arrows, referring to the inclusion and exclusion of texts and non-texts (see Figure 1). In our terms, these two spheres represent the Homeworld (Ego-culture) as it is opposed to an

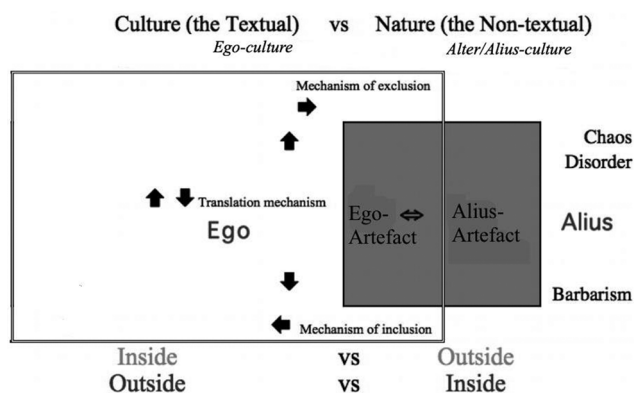


Figure 1: Canonical model as it can be deduced from the Tartu school articles (in the interpretation of Sonesson 2000).

indifferentiated foreign world, comprising the Alienworld (Alius-culture) and the Alterworld (Alter-culture). What I will henceforth call the Canonical model is built around an opposition between Nature and Culture by means of which both terms are constituted, in the classical sense of linguistic structuralism, i. e. by mutually defining each other. Yet a fundamental asymmetry is built into the model: Nature is defined from the point of view of Culture, not the opposite. According to the Canonical model, every Culture conceives of itself as Order, opposed to something on the outside, which is seen as Chaos, Disorder, and Barbarism, in other words, as Culture opposed to Nature. Though this feature certainly remains rather implicit in the Tartu school approach, this means that cultural models are always ego-centric: Culture is always culture from the point of view of an Ego. Only in this way can we understand that something, which is a “text” on one side of the cultural divide, becomes a “non-text” on the other side of the border, and vice-versa. Most “non-texts,” in this sense, will be placed outside of culture by the mechanism of exclusion, however some of them can be “translated”, but then also deformed, by means of the “mechanism of translation.” In the terminology of the Tartu school, that which is inside culture is regarded as a “text” proper, and that which is outside it is a “non-text.”

In the Tartu school papers there are several conflicting criteria for defining what a text is, and hence what Culture is (since Textuality is that which is inside Culture), and these do not always go together. Reducing the criteria for inclusion and exclusion as much as possible, I concluded that, from one point of view, the non-text is that which is not possible to understand, but, from another point of view, it is that which we do not care to understand because it is not familiar and/or because we do not ascribe any value to it (Sonesson 1998). Often those two criteria do not coincide, as is the case of sacred languages (Latin, Hebrew, etc.), which are, at certain historical moments, highly valued, but very difficult to understand. This suggests a way in which the Canonical model is too simple: the limits between texts and non-texts (extra-texts, centro-texts, etc.) will often be different as different criteria are used, which means that the limits between Culture and Non-culture (Extra-culture, Centre, etc.) will also be different: the Canonical model is simply the case in which all these different oppositions will map out the same border (see Sonesson 1998). Thus, if, in an example given by the Tartu school, Peter the Great wanted to emulate Western culture, he followed an *inverted model* from the point of view of value, in which he projected his ego to what was, from the point of view of understanding (and geographical situatedness), his own original culture devaluated to non-culture.

3 (Almost) at home in the Alienworld

As long as we think in terms of the Canonical model, Nature will include other cultures, not recognised as such by the cultural model. It is easy to see that this is true of most traditional cultures and is even codified in their language: one of the Mayan languages still spoken in Mexico, the Huesteco, has only one term (“uinic”) for saying “human being” and “speaker of the Huesteco language.” Indeed, it is well-known that Barbarians were, to the Greeks, those who could not speak the Greek language: those who babble, i. e. who make sounds which not only are not meaningful but even lack organisation; the Aztecs took the same view on those who did not speak Nahuatl, the “popolucan” (see Sonesson 2000). But, beyond such linguistic relics in cultures which can no longer defend their central position (such as the case of Maya Huesteco, the speakers of which are now reduced to being poor farmers in a society dominated by Spanish speakers), the reign of the Canonical model is also testified to in ethnological studies of traditional societies, many of them only historically retrievable, but also apparent in some societies only recently “contacted” (by our reputedly globalised society), such as those in the innermost parts of New Guinea. As Jared Diamond (2012: 49 f.) observes, in traditional societies “‘friends’ are members of your own band or village, and of those neighboring bands and villages with which your band happens to be on friendly terms at the moment. ‘Enemies’ are members of neighboring bands and villages with which your band happens to be on hostile terms at the moment.” And, as he goes on to say, the third category, “strangers,” about which you cannot know very much, is, to be on the safe side, better assimilated to the second category.

As mentioned above, Husserl (1973) actually proposed a similar model to that of the Tartu school, dividing the *Lifeworld* into the *Homeworld* and the *Alienworld*. All through his work, Husserl emphasises that the Lifeworld is a relative world – relative, to a (type of) subject. Even the *Umwelt* in the sense of von Uexküll is relative to a type of subject, that is, an animal species. However, Husserl goes on to say that the structures of the Lifeworld are not themselves relative. They are found in each and every socio-cultural Lifeworld. In posthumous texts, Husserl (1973) pinpointed one such universal structure, which is of particular interest to us here: the distinction between the Homeworld and the Alienworld (as referred in Steinbock 2003: 296 ff.; cf. Steinbock 1995). In this sense, the Homeworld (*Heimwelt*) “is not one place among others, but a normatively special geo-historical place which is constituted with a certain asymmetrical privilege” (Steinbock 2003: 296), and which can be identified with a family or with a whole culture. In each case, what is outside of it is the Alienworld

(Fremdwelt; see Figure 2). Basically, this is the same conception, clearly without there being any influence, as that formulated by the Tartu school of semiotics. Both Husserl’s version, and that of the Tartu school are too simple, at least in one respect: they involve the smallest possible scope of the Alienworld, such as may be characteristic of small, isolated groups of people.

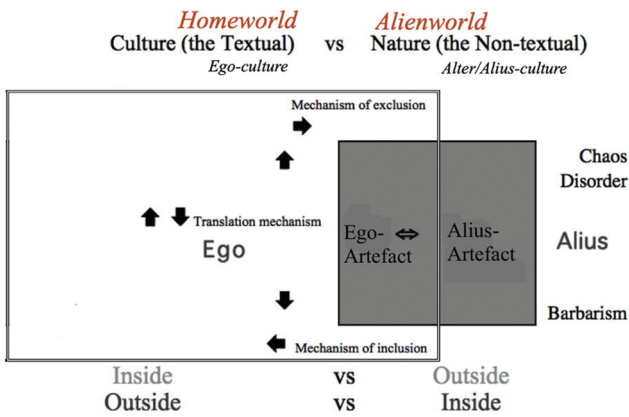


Figure 2: The revised Canonical model of cultural semiotics.

According to what I have elsewhere (in Sonesson 2000) called the extended model, there really are two kinds of alienworlds – or, more precisely, both an Alienworld and an Alterworld (Figure 3). There are those you treat as different

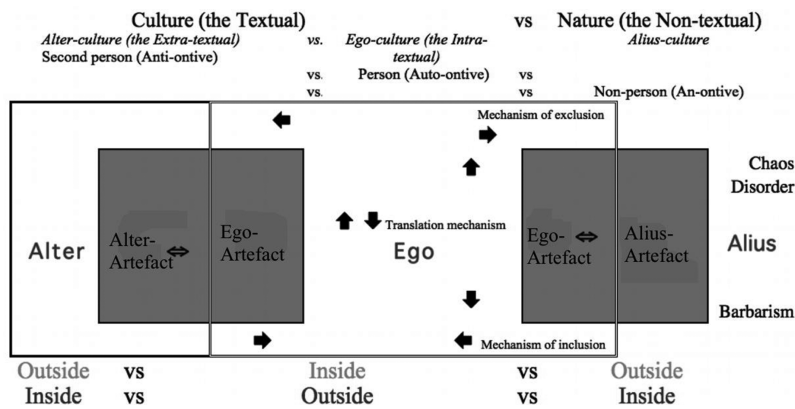


Figure 3: The extended model of cultural semiotics.

but equal, with whom you are on speaking terms, those others that are really other egos to you. These represent the second person of grammar, or, in other words, the Alter. And there are those you treat as things, as the third person of grammar, or, in other terms, as Alius. As suggested above, this is clearly illustrated in the respective attitude of Cortés and Columbus on their first encounter with the “new world.” There are thus three distinct “worlds”, each of which is defined by the central position of the Ego, Alter, and Alius, which therefore may be termed Ego-culture, Alter-culture, and Alius-culture (Sonesson 2000; Cabak Rédei 2007). Or, to continue on the line of Husserl, we may talk about the Homeworld, the Alterworld, and the Alienworld.

Now, let us add some history to this picture. Although the Tartu school was principally involved with historical moments, the model itself does not contain any explicit diachronic dimension. It is nevertheless easy to think of Ego-culture, Alter-culture, and Alius-culture as distributed in time rather than in space. The hermeneutic act would then amount to the transformation of Alius into Alter – similar to empathy, in present-day interaction. Following the suggestion of Dunér (this volume), this process could be called *Alter-ation*, the opposition being properly termed *Alien-ation*. The depth of history becomes more palpable if we take into account what Husserl called the genetic and generative dimensions (cf. Welton 2000; Steinbock 1995). Every object in our experience has a *genetic* dimension: it results from the layering, or sedimentation, of the different acts that connects it with its origin, which gives it its validity, in personal history of each given subject. There is also the further dimension of *generativity*, which pertains to all objects, and which results from the layering, or sedimentation, of the different acts in which they have become known, which may be acts of perception, memory, anticipation, imagination, and so on, situated on the historical dimension, properly speaking. The term generativity is meant to evoke the idea of generations following each other, as well as the trajectory accomplished by each individual from being born to dying. Thus, we may hypothesize that Culture, as identified with the Occident, is, as a type of experience, genetically constituted for Peter the Great from his experiences of living in Western countries, but it is in this sense opposed to his generative experience, of being born, as a result of many early generations of his family, into Russian society.

History has an immediate impact on the here-and-now. Any act, whether communicative or not, is at the same time based on sedimentations of earlier acts, both genetic and generative, and the source of new sedimentations, sometimes of both kinds. This is why what is presented, in the Tartu school model, as a relation between cultures, is better conceived as something occurring at some particular moment of encounter between the cultures. Cortés meeting the first natives and Cortés ordering the destruction

of all the idols in Tenochtitlán is not living the same encounter between cultures. In the first case, he clearly relates to the Aztecs as an *Alter*, in the second case as an *Alius*. A series of such events (perhaps the normal or normative ones) may then be abstracted to a more general level, presenting how encounters between these particular cultures normally play out. But these generalizations, if at all possible, can go more or less degrees up the scale of generality – which, of course, once again, depend on what is decided within the particular Ego-culture.

We rely in the following on a model of communication, which is very different from the one usually taken for granted in semiotics: it supposes that all kinds of communication consist in presenting an artefact to another subject and assigning him or her the task of transforming it into a percept by means of a concretisation, that is, the task of giving it a meaning (See Figure 4). This is a generalisation of the model of artistic experience proposed by the Prague school, itself based on Husserlean phenomenology, but with an added social dimension (see Sonesson 1999, Sonesson 2014). There may or may not be any transport and/or recodage involved, but the essential thing, in an act of communication, is that a subject produces an artefact and, at the same time, prompts another subject to search for an interpretation of this artefact, using the overlap between the pool of knowledge of the two subjects. In the present context, we are particularly interested in a special kind of communication, translation, which

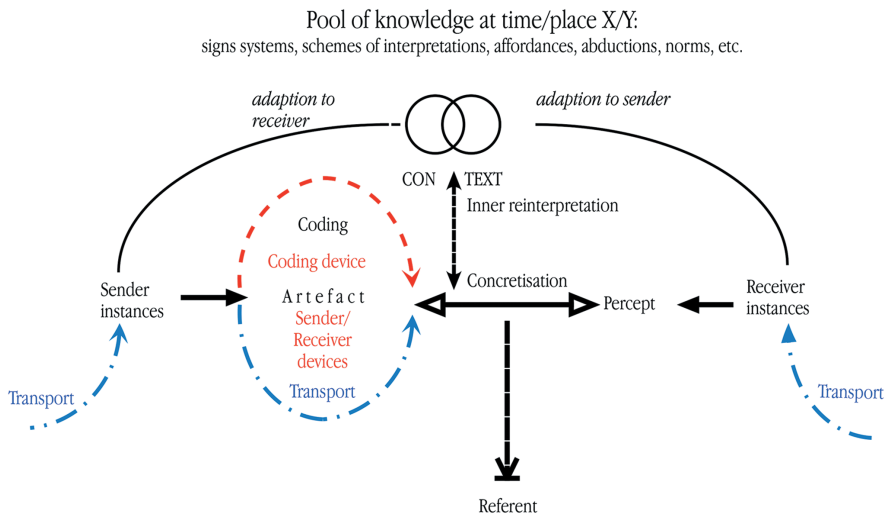


Figure 4: The act of communication, as presented in Sonesson (1999, 2014).

consists in a double act of communication, in which the addressee of the first act is at the same time the addresser of the second act, and in which he or she is trying to maintain as much constancy of meaning as possible, given the differences between languages and/or other semiotic resources (see further Sonesson 2014 and Figure 5). None of this really applies to what Jakobson (1959) has called intralinguistic translation, in which constancy is normally not sought, but, on the contrary, a more adequate term for rendering the nature of the experience to be conveyed. An exception may be when one is trying to find a word approaching the meaning originally intended, while still being comprehensible for some particular group, such as children or foreigners who do not dominate the language used.

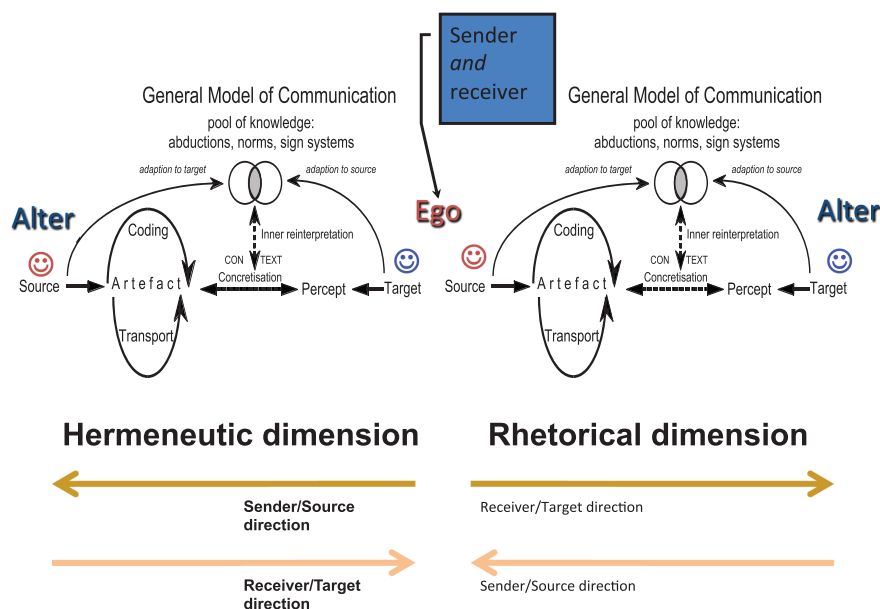


Figure 5: The act of translation as a double act of communication, as suggested in Sonesson (2014).

On the other hand, Jakobson's intersemiotic translation, which we will henceforth call transposition, is really similar in structure to translation proper, with the difference that the semiotic means employed are of quite a different nature, which poses much more serious obstacles to the process. A "translation" from language to film or even to a static picture has to add a lot of new facts (specific

looks of the persons, etc.). It could be objected that this also happens between languages, which it true, but not to the same degree. It would not make sense to try to summarize here all the hurdles faced by the different transpositions of Shakespeare's "Macbeth" into film: "translating" only the single personage of Macbeth into visual form requires an innumerable series of choices on many different dimensions, such as the type of crown, the shape of the head, the shape of the beard, etc. In the case of a dramatic text, such as "Macbeth" basically without any stage directions, this gap in information becomes particularly obvious, but even descriptions contained in novels cannot be as precise as the visual world itself, whether it is conveyed by means of pictures or theatrical representation.

Nevertheless, there is another difference between translation and transposition, as we are accustomed to encounter the latter in the present-day world: the director of a film, which is (in part) a transposition of, for instance, the tragedy "Macbeth" by William Shakespeare, is not necessarily interested in conveying as much as possible the same meaning as Shakespeare tried to convey in his tragedy. Rather, to a greater or smaller extent, he may very well be using Shakespeare's work to flesh out ideas of his own. A deeper analysis of the different films bearing this title by Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa, Roman Polanski and, most recently, Justin Kurzel would no doubt give ample illustrations to this claim. However, we will see later that, in other contexts, transposition may have a function more comparable to that of translation.

Something is a cultural translation when it takes place between different cultures, whether the process as such is translation proper or transposition between different semiotic means. The communication may take place between an Ego-culture and an Alius- or Alter-culture, between an Alius and an Alter-culture, or between two Alius- or Alter-cultures. Since all cultures are defined from the point of view of an Ego situated in one culture, what this means in terms of the application to concrete cultures will of course vary. Nevertheless, it is the relation between Ego and Alter which defines the axis of communication: that defining with whom one is on speaking terms. The relation between Ego and Alius, on the contrary, can be described as the axis of nomination: something you talk about, but with whom you do not enter into a conversation (see Sonesson 2000 and Figure 6). In any case, a translation involving Alius-culture rather than Alter-culture will necessarily involve more obstacles to communication. The best solution to such a conundrum is certainly to shift the relation to one of Alter-culture. But that is not always easily done.

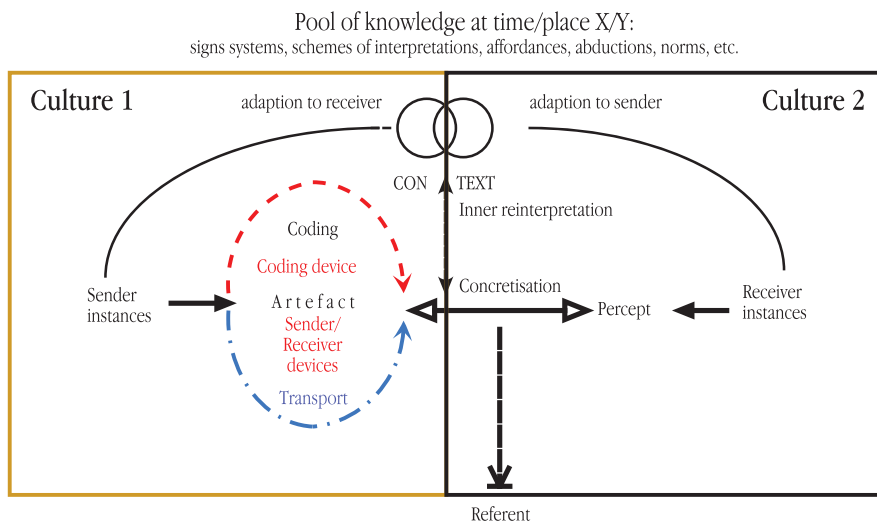


Figure 6: Any combination in a communicative situation of Ego-, Alius- and Alter-culture may occur at different moments, even between the same cultures, as presented in Dunér and Sonesson (2016).

4 The process of translation and transposition

In the history of the encounter between Europe and what was known at the time as the new world, two testimonies stand out, one of the reasons being that their accounts are conveyed by both verbal and pictorial means. One of these was the *El Primer Nueva Coronica y Buen Gobierno* written and drawn in the first decade of the seventeenth century by Felipe Huaman Poma de Ayala, whose father was one of the conquistadors of Peru, and whose mother came from a noble Quechua family. The book holds 1189 pages, 398 pages of which consist of Huaman Poma's own full-page drawings, althogher in a basically Westernized, but naivistic, style, and the rest is made up of his verbal text in a mixture of Spanish and Quechua (see López-Baralt 1988; Adorno 1981, Adorno 2001, Adorno 2007; Graulich and Núñez Tolin 2000). The second case is constituted by the work of Bernardino de Sahagún (1499–1590), the most well-known manifestation of which is *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*, also known as the Florentine Codex, consisting of 12 books in Nahuatl and Spanish written between 1578 and 1580, and containing 1846 pictures (see Sahagún 1979 [1577]; and for the pictures Sahagún 2012 [1577]). Because of this book, Sahagún has been described as the first anthropologist, since he did not only take it on

himself to describe the culture of the foreign (in this case, conquered) culture, but to have it told by members of that culture itself. But this work was preceded by another attempt to realize the same thing, *Primeros Memoriales*, written in-between 1558 and 1560, which consists of four books, together with 645 pictures and glosses in Nahuatl (see Sahagún 1997 [1561]; Robertson 1959; Edmondson 1974; Baird 1993; Hill Boone 2000; Wolf et al. 2011).

The reason Sahagún's endeavor is of more interest to us in the present context, is that, to realise his goals, he employed a semiotically complex process involving several languages (Nahuatl, Spanish and perhaps Latin), several kinds of semiotic resources (language and pictures), and several cultural groups (the friar himself, his former indigenous students versant in Nahuatl, Latin, and Spanish and in Western culture, and the surviving Elders of the Mexica people). The pictures illustrating *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* are basically Western in their style, although containing survivals of the pre-Hispanic pictorial style. However, much more importantly, the idea of producing such a work is no doubt profoundly Occidental. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the very process by means of which the work was realised involved the production of pictures which were no doubt more autochthonous in style (and of which there are more obvious traces in *Primeros Memoriales*), but also a use of pictures as a way of communication which is basically foreign to the Western world.

To visualize the complex process of translation and transposition which was the foundation of Sahagún's work (which was also very much the work of his native students and the elders they interviewed), it will be useful to start with a more simple case, which is nevertheless fairly complicated. Cortés, it will be remembered, unlike Columbus, took a hermeneutical approach to the conquest of America, treating the Aztecs, temporally as it turned out, as being members of Alter-culture (see Sonesson 2000, Sonesson 2012). There were practical conditions which made this possible. Even before arriving into the Nahua (Aztec) capital, while traversing Yucatán, Cortés found Aquilar, a Spaniard who had been stranded in an earlier attempt to colonize Mexico, and who, during his captivity, had had the time to learn Maya Yucateco. When joining forces with some native groups who wanted to take up the fight with their Aztec oppressors, Cortés also received the slave woman Malintzín as a gift, and she fortunately spoke both Maya and the language of the Aztecs, Nahuatl. Cortés took advantage of this discovery to form a chain of interpretation from Spanish, over Maya, to Nahuatl, linguistically, and no doubt also to some extent culturally. Contrary to Columbus, Cortés was certainly aware of there being another culture present, which had to be thoroughly scrutinized before any forced cultural substitution could take place. The clearest example

of this attitude is of course his presenting himself as being the white God Quetzalcoatl coming from over the sea (See Figure 7).² Later on, this technique of thoroughly assimilating the heritage of the other to better extirpate it was perfected by Sahagún, hailed as the first anthropologist because of his protracted and comprehensive attempt to document the whole of Nahua culture – including the specifically religious elements, all with the declared aim to better eradicate them.

In both these cases, the acts of communication no doubt were iterated over and over again during a more or less extended period. However complex, they were acts of *parole*. An immediate difference between Cortés' indirect dialogue with Moctezuma, and Sahagún work with his students and their elders, is that the latter, but not the former, produced an enduring artefact, the book which we ascribe to Sahagún. This is not to say that the former series of dialogues did not produce their results. They had numerous results, but, as far as we can tell, to the extent that they were enduring, they were destructive rather than constructive.

To understand what Sahagún did, some background in the history of the Spanish conquest of Mesoamerica may be necessary. As noted above, after Cortés had used an Alter-style approach to immisce himself in Aztec culture, he did not hesitate to change his cultural model approach, treating the Aztecs as barbarians and thus smashing the “idols” of their temples. He had many followers, not least among the representatives of monastary orders which soon invaded the continent. Many of these “idols” were really destroyed, but some where hidden away. Also “painted books” were obliterated, but not only were some hidden away, but the abilities to create those books persisted and could be employed to produce new versions (see Sonesson 2019a). Unlike the Chinese tradition of combining drawings with writing on a single surface, the “painted books” found in Mesoamerica consist of drawings, which are basically types standing for fixed categories: places, social roles, etc. After the Spanish invasion, new “painted books” were created, which added explanatory texts written in Nahuatl, or other indigenous languages, using Latin letters. Elders later on told stories and painted images at the incitation of Sahagún and others. Even

² Whether this really happened is an open question. In a book which is good at demolishing many of the myths of the encounter between Cortés and Moctezuma (although it suggests alternative courses of action with at least as scanty evidence), Restall (2018) claims that this story, now found in all books recounting the conquest of Mexico, was first presented, with an appreciable time difference, in Sahagún's work. It could be retorted that Sahagún was also the first to ask the Aztecs to tell the story from their point of view. As we will see below, however, the “version of the vanquished”, as it has come down to us, is a multiply edited story.

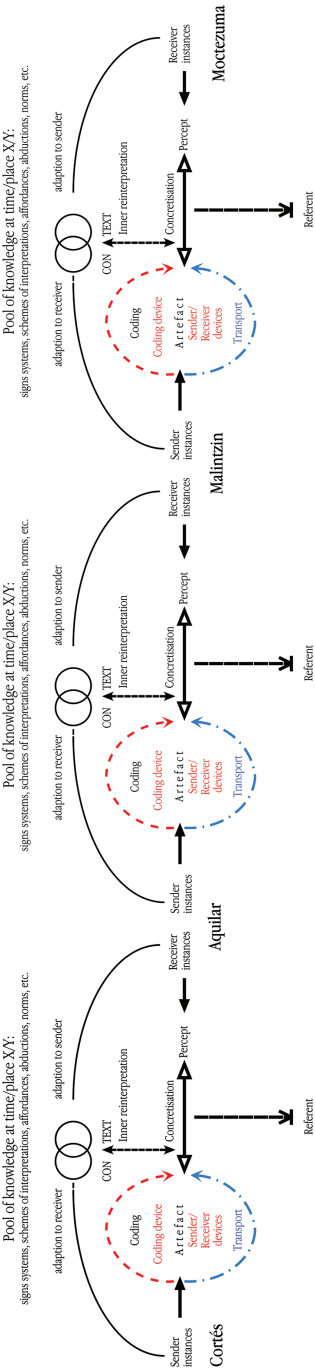


Figure 7: The chain of translation allowing Cortés to speak to Moctezuma, as illustrated in Dunér and Sonesson (2016).

later, native artists added Pre-Columbian elements to Christian frescoes in the new churches. A number of self-proclaimed apostles/living gods, from 1537 to 1761, revived Pre-Columbian rituals and other behavior in between 1537 and 1761 (see Gruzinski 1985, Gruzinski 1988, Gruzinski 1990, Gruzinski 1991, Gruzinski 1999).

The transposition procedure employed by Sahagún for creating first, *Primeros Memoriales*, and then, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* was much more elaborate than the translation chain of Cortés, not only because it comprised both translations and transpositions, but also because it involved many more passages from one stage of translation and/or transposition to other such stages. At least, this applies to the *Historia*, because the procedure is described in that book. First, Sahagún wrote a questionnaire, in Spanish or in Nahuatl. His students, the children of the native nobles who had learnt Spanish, Latin and (written and grammatical) Nahuatl in Tlatelolco, took this questionnaire to the Elders of their villages, people who qualified because they were alive already at the time of the conquest (although there would very probably have been other requirement, too). The Elders answered using pictures. Since the Spaniards had then been busy for a long time destroying the “painted books” of the Aztecs and their neighbors, the Elders must either have created the pictures on the spot (relying on their culturally inherited ability to do so) or retrieved them from hidden treasure boxes. Then the Elders explained orally in Nahuatl what the pictures represented, and the students wrote down these glosses in their written Nahuatl “below” the pictures. We do not know exactly what Sahagún meant by the glosses being written “below” the pictures, whether this should be taken in a literal sense or not. Sahagún and/or the students transformed this into a running text in Nahuatl, which is the text of one of the columns in the *Historia* as we know it. The Nahuatl text was translated into Spanish, thus forming the second column of the text. Then a third row was added containing philological comments to the Nahuatl terms.³ Given the document as we possess it, we know that there was a final stage, not mentioned by Sahagún: Pictures were added, possibly copying the Elders’ pictures. This may very well have been the case in *Primeros Memoriales*, since these pictures do not show any conspicuous Western influence. However, it is obvious that new pictures of a relatively more Westernized brand were created for the *Historia* (see Table 1).

³ Written Nahuatl was, of course, a creation of the Spanish monastics, with the aim of furthering the conversion to Christianity. This is also a story of cultural encounter, which cannot be recounted here.

Table 1: Stages of translation and transposition leading to the creation of *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*.

	Nahuatl language and culture	Spanish language and culture
Language	Questionnaire ↓	← · · · · ·
Pictures	Picture writing ↓	
Language	Nahuatl glosses ↓ Nahuatl running text ↓	Spanish translation Philological glosses
Pictures	Pictures as illustrations — · · · · · →	

No doubt the element which is most surprising to us in this procedure of translations and transposition is the fact that the Elders answered the questionnaire using pictures. From the point of view of our contemporary cultures, this seems a very roundabout way to proceed. Why not simply answer the question in (spoken) Nahuatl? We will turn to this issue in the next section, but first we must look a little closer at what Sahagún hoped to achieve.

Not only is the exchange of acts of translation and transposition which renders Sahagún’s work possible extremely complex: it also supposes an intricate dialectics of the pools of knowledge, including the values, of the stakeholders in the process. To tell the truth, Sahagún is the only one whose values we can know about with certainty, because he is there (in the text) to tell us about them. He is out to extirpate pre-Christian religion. In order to do so, he needs to know as much as possible about this religion. So far, he seems to be doing the same thing as Cortés, only on a grander scale. But he is certainly not intent to destroy other aspects of pre-Hispanic culture. On the contrary, he shows admiration for many of its aspects, in particular its system of education. Yet, his own description contributes to showing that pre-Hispanic religion and pre-Hispanic culture is inextricable enmeshed into each other. It is not at all surprising that, in the end, Sahagún’s writings were suppressed by the authorities.

As pointed out above, the borderline drawn between Alter-culture and Alius-culture according to the criterion of knowledge does not necessarily coincide with that established according to the criterion of values. At the outset, Sahagún is open to knowledge about Pre-Hispanic culture, and he already has an appreciable knowledge about it. To him, the other is Alter according to the criterion of knowledge. At the same time, he utterly rejects Pre-Hispanic religion. To him, thus, the other is Alius according to the criterion of value. The students have knowledge of both Western and Pre-Hispanic culture – up to a point. Thus, the culture they are investigating is Alter according to knowledge, but it is not clear what it represents as far as value is concerned. The Elders have knowledge of Pre-Hispanic culture, and may still share its values (Ego-culture). Their attitude to Western culture is unknown. The painters/scribes have knowledge of Pre-Hispanic culture (notably in *Primeros Memoriales*) and Western culture (notably in *Historia*). There are too many unknowns to this equation. We will simply have to take account of the complexity of such operations as those initiated by Sahagún on the border between different cultures, languages, and semiotic resources. Nevertheless, we will have something more to say about the usage to which pictures are put in this operation. This will allow us to observe the part played by pictures in pre-Hispanic America which was foreign to Europeans at the time of Sahagún, which it still is – at least as long as we do not take a closer look at what is happening all around us.

5 How to do things with pictures

Many travel accounts after Columbus and Cortez were richly illustrated, and so were those accounts written by representatives of the earlier dominant culture assimilated into the new occidental culture. Several books by Serge Gruzinski (1988, 1990, 1999) discuss this confrontation of images, although taking a very slight interest in the pictures as such. Bucher (1977), analyses the engravings of Théodore Le Bry accompanying his selection of travel account published during the sixteenth century. Bucher's analysis starts out from a postulated ideology rather than from the pictures as such (see also Duchet 1987). As mentioned above, there have even been several publications more or less concerned with the pictures in *Primeros Memoriales* and *Codex Florentino* (see Robertson 1959; Edmonson 1974; Baird 1993; Hill Boone 2000; Wolf et al. 2011), which are all capital contributions to the interpretation of the texts and their contexts, but they do not really address the questions which are relevant from a semiotical point of view.

So far, we have been following rather closely traditional Sahagún exegesis, although we have tried to reformulate the issues in semiotically more relevant terms. Thus, we have discussed the way in which Sahagún collected descriptions of their ancient beliefs from members of the elite of Aztec culture, and we have tried to account for the complexity of this process in semiotical terms. However, it is only from a semiotical perspective that the fact becomes salient that, as part of the procedure initiated by his questionnaire, Sahagún had native artists create pictures. Just as the text, these images are clearly the result of the encounter between two cultures, and there is a lot to be said about the mestization of cultures as it also appears in these pictures (see further Section 6 below). Whether or not the pictures solicited by Sahagún from the Elders are the pictures appearing in the texts (which might be possible to some extent in *Primeros Memoriales* but not in *Codex Florentino*), what is more interesting is the peculiar part played by pictures in the procedure, which is very different from what might be expected, given the Western experience of Sahagún, at the time, and also, it would seem, given our own Western experience.

Elsewhere, I have critically reviewed, and tried to amend, the results of the tradition, only to mention the highlights, from Lessing to Goodman (1968), which opposes language and pictures as being intrinsically different ways of packaging meaning. It is, in fact, rather misleading to talk about this as a tradition: in-between Lessing and Goodman, there were, as far as I am aware, only a few scholars, such as, most notably, Degérando, who took an interest in the issue. Even taking into account the limitations resulting from the things taken for granted in the age in which he lived, Lessing no doubt made the most important contribution so far to spelling out the differences between language and pictures. More recently, Wellbery (1984) translated Lessing's distinctions into the terms used in the Saussure-Hjelmslev tradition of semiotics, and Bayer (1975) accomplished the same work using Peircean terminology. As far as I know, however, I am the only one who has taken Lessing seriously, to the point of trying to show where he is wrong. It will not be necessary, in the present context, to go into any details of my critique of Lessing's conception (see Sonesson 1996). Nevertheless, I will go on to suggest that, to some extent, Lessing, Degérando, Goodman and myself were all mistaken, because we took for granted the way pictures have commonly been used in the Occident for the last few thousand years – which was not how pictures were used in Mesoamerica, as it seems, and which is not how pictures are increasingly used today, most clearly in the domain of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), where special visual sign systems based on this idea have long been created, but also, it would seem, in contemporary social media.

According to Lessing, pictures can only render fully determinate entities, whereas language can render all kinds of units. The idea is that the picture, in order to convey the meaning of something in the perceptual world, must render the whole object referred to with all its properties, or perhaps the whole perceptual scene. Language, in the other hand, can choose to pick up those features of the object which are relevant in the context. This is clearly untrue, already because pictures cannot render (directly) any non-visual properties of the object depicted (except by convention and, to some extent, by synaesthesia). Perhaps we should say instead that pictures can only render visually determinate entities. If so, we come close to Goodman's claim that pictures are dense and replete, in the sense of any line of a picture being relevant to the ascription of properties to the object depicted. Goodman opposes this case not only to language, but more closely to diagrams, in which only those points on the line are relevant where the vertical and horizontal axes, both with their labels, meet. But this is clearly not true either. The contours of a drawing depicting Mount Fuji are only relevant given a certain scale. It would be absurd to use a microscope focused on the drawing to find out the exact shape of the mountain. Let us conclude then, that the picture needs to convey a relatively big chunk of connected properties of the perceptual world in order for the object to be recognizable. Language, on the other hand, cannot convey even relatively determinate entities in this sense. It has to rely on our ability to map words to things. Given these presuppositions, language is certainly able to present all kinds of units, but only rendered as a limited number of properties abstracted from the wholes of the Lifeworld.

More specifically, Lessing claims that pictures can only directly render "bodies" (spatial continua), while "events" (temporal continua) only can be indirectly rendered by traces left on bodies (spatial continua). He is here clearly thinking of single static pictures. He could't know about the cinema, of course, but he does consider the theatre to be an exception in this case. Language, on the other hand, according to Lessing, directly renders "events" (temporal continua) but "bodies" (spatial continua) only indirectly. In fact, of course, the ability of language to directly render events is rather limited. Every realisation of language is certainly an event, but it is rarely the same event as that which is conveyed. From the point of view of content, this is only true of some onomatopoeic words. If we only consider temporal coincidence, we could say that the radio reporter who recounts a sport event while it happens presents a case in point. With few exceptions, language is actually limited to rendering both "bodies" (spatial continua) and "events" (temporal continua) indirectly as pregnant moment and sensate qualities, in different combinations. If we go beyond the single sign, the situation is certainly quite different. In some languages with

abundant case markings, the order of words may imitate the order of the happening. Even in other languages, with more difficulty, sentences may be ordered in the same way as the corresponding events were deployed. In other words, thanks to its combinatory, language is quite good at telling stories. This does not mean, however, that pictures cannot tell stories, at least not virtual ones: precisely those “traces left on bodies” allow us to anticipate what might happen next and what may have occurred before the depicted moment. This is more or less what I concluded in my earlier writings (Sonesson 1996, Sonesson 1997, Sonesson 2014).

6 Doing other things with pictures

Be that as it may, Lessing, Goodman, and I have taken for granted a certain way of using pictures with which we are familiar. We have assumed that pictures are ordinarily used to make detailed descriptions of things or situations, and that they tend not to form part of any direct situation of communication, that is, more specifically, a dialogue. Correlatively, we have considered that language is mostly used to convey a relevant piece of information, within the frames of a direct situation of communication or dialogue. If these models of pictorial and verbal communication were necessarily valid in all cultures, it becomes very mysterious that the Elders answered Sahagún’s questionnaire drawing (or retrieving existing) pictures. But this is only part of the enigma. One may also wonder why the Elders then went on to comment orally on the pictures, and why the students wrote down these comments under the pictures. Moreover, if these pictures were similar to those we find in the “painted books” of the Aztecs, then it is not clear that what they show are “determinate” or “dense” entities, although they do certainly render the world in somewhat bigger chunks than language would allow. This is how the Aztec glyph for “mountain” looks (Figure 8(a)). And this is a specific mountain, “Chapultepec,” the mountain of the grasshopper (Figure 8(b)). Employing this picture is rather like saying: “This is a mountain”, or, as the case may be, “This is the grasshopper mountain.” That is to say, the picture conveys a relevant piece of information (a feature) rather than describing a perceptual experience. At the level of content, it is a type, not a token. Placed on a map, the latter becomes an instance, which says “Here is the grasshopper mountain.” Whatever else this is, it is certainly a way of conveying a piece of information, not an occasion for extending oneself in the description of any dainty details pertaining to the conformation of mountains in general, or any particular mountain, such as Chapultepec, quite contrary to the

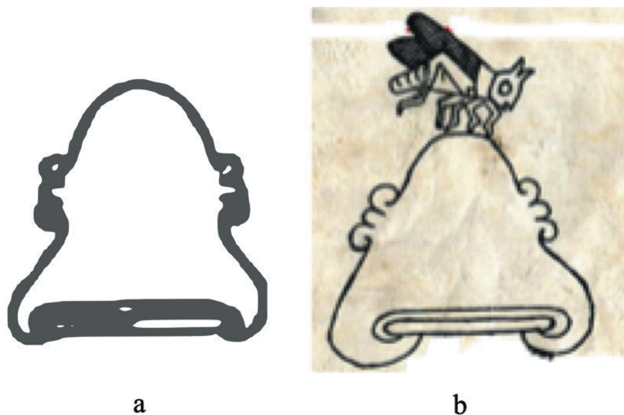


Figure 8: Aztec glyphs: (a) The generic glyph for mountain; (b) The glyph for Chapultepec, ‘the grasshopper mountain.’.

case of Fuiyama, as conceived by Goodman. As a mountain, Chapultepec certainly looks different from other mountains, but that is not part of what is conveyed by the corresponding sign. Chapultepec is not conveyed as anything like “a fully determinate entity”; there is no real “density” to this sign. Instead, the sign serves to label this particular mountain or, as it were, this particular place.

It is now known that Moctezuma (and now doubt his predecessors) disposed of a whole system for conveying information and/or spying spanning the whole of Mesoamerica, which was based on the use of pictures (Bernand and Gruzinski 1991: 322). Thanks to this system, Moctezuma knew, for instance, about the earlier incursions of the Spaniards in 1517 and 1518, as well as about the battles at Tabasco and Tlaxcala (Bernand and Gruzinski 1991: 323). It is easy to think of at least two reasons for Moctezuma preferring to use pictures to other semiotic resource in the espionage system, the first being the immense number of languages belonging to very different stocks existing at the time in Mesoamerica, the domains of which the messages had to cross; and the second being the ease of transporting pictures over distances, given that there was no written version of Nahuatl at the time. But it might be wrong to think of this as being constraints imposed only of the espionage system. As Bernand and Gruzinski report, Spanish priest rapidly adopted the habit of having the natives confess their sins by pointing to the pictures illustrating them. As they remark: “Saurait-on imaginer plus étonnant détournement d’un mode d’expression traditionnelle au service de l’évangélisation?” [‘Is it possible to image a more

surprising confiscating of a means of expression traditionally put at the service of evangelization?"] (Bernand and Gruzinski 1991: 397). But one would have liked to know how these pictures looked, i. e. if they followed the Western or (which seems more plausible) the pre-Hispanic tradition, which, as we suggested above, does not aim to any "dense" rendering of reality, but rather to conveying a relatively abstract idea of something being the case.

Here we once again come upon tradition, not, at the moment that of the native Mexicans but that of the continuity and development of Western interpretations of alien cultures, long after the contributions of Sahagún and Raynal. The psychologist Pierre Janet, mostly known nowadays, if at all, as having being (briefly) the teacher of both Freud and Piaget, wrote a book about the development of memory, which later was at least one of the inspirations for Bartlett's (1967 [1932]) notion of scheme. Janet's (1928: 284ff) indications relevant to this matter are, to be sure, very brief: he notes that many people are in the habit of using imaginary spatial arrangements, i. e. a "schéma tiré de l'espace", where they place information they would like to remember, in the same manner as we enter an important date in the calendary grid furnished by our diary. Curiously, Janet seems to be unaware of the fact that a long tradition concerned with such an "art of memory" was prominent all through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Europe (see Yates 1966; Gomez de Liano 1982; Carruthers 1998). As an example (which we would nowadays think of as an instance of a scheme) he gives an ancient Nahua ("Aztec") map (i. e. the exodus from Totomihuaca, Puebla, Mexico), which he identifies as a history book, where the imaginary paths form a scheme on which are tacked the notable events. Whatever else this is, it is certainly a way of telling a story, less, it would seem, by means of "traces left on bodies", but simply by juxtaposing in space what is supposed to be a sequence in time, adding, sometimes, a particular kind of traces, those of an array of footsteps indicating a direction.

Although this may throw some light on why the Elders, in the process of Sahagún's inquiry, responded by producing (or presenting) pictures, we still have to understand why it was necessary for the Elders to comment orally on them, and for these comments to be taken down by the students. If such glooses were taken to be obligatory at the time, did this also apply to Moctezuma's spies? This would require them to travel along with their drawings, which goes against the reasons which we adduced above for using drawings in the Aztec espionage system. In this case, as in that of Sahagún's Elders, the preservation of information would only be piece-meal, subordinated to a craft of memory, in which the pictures serve as prompts for a spoken memory record retained in the mind, as an endogram, not an exogram, to use Donald's (2010) terms: the information which is accumulated inside of the human organism, as opposed

to that which is contained in different extensions of the mind. More exactly, the whole idea of a craft of memory would seem to repose on the possible interaction between exograms and endograms, where the former, at least in the Western variety, consists in the imaginary placement of things which has to be remembered in real buildings and other constituents of the environment (see Yates 1966; Gomez de Liano 1982; Carruthers 1998). No matter what else it may be, this is obviously as case of what is nowadays discussed in terms of “extended mind” (Clark and Chalmers 1998; Hutto and Myin 2013; Rowlands 2010; Sonesson 2016b, Sonesson 2019b).

Basing himself on the studies of a different tradition of the art of memory, which originated in the pre-Hispanic Americas, and which in some parts (in Panama and Colombia where the Kuna lives) is still practiced, Severi (2007) has insisted that the classical distinction between cultures dominated by orality and those which has attained to the stage of written language is misleading, since the former also always seems to involve the use of pictures, or, as he calls them, pictographs.⁴ Severi has a lot to say about picture use in cultures both to the north and the south of Mexico, from the Inuit and the Sioux to the Kuna, where they function as a kind of memory devices serving to cue a verbally performed autobiography or a shamanistic act. We have no evidence for Aztec pictures accomplishing any shamanistic function, nor being used for autobiography, but, if we suppose the schaministic act to be a kind of communication with the spirits, all instances so far mentioned have to do with a communicate uses of pictures, involving both the conveyance and the accumulation of information. One observation, however, which can probably be generalized from Severi’s study of pictographs used to the north and to the south of Mexico to those employed by the Aztecs is that, unlike Maya glyphs (see Coe 1992; Coe and Van Stone 2005), they are in no sense even embryonic systems of writing, but constitute a quite different kind of semiotic resource, which have more in common with pictures as we know them, in spite of all the differences to our common sense notion of pictures (see Baird 1993; Hill Boone 2000; Wolf et al. 2011). Any attempt to make sense of Aztec pictographs in syllabic terms seems to give rise to fairly arbitrary guessing of riddles (see Jiménez and Smith 2008; Lacadena 2008; and, in particular, Robertson 2017).

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Sonesson 2016a: 45f), when commenting on Donald’s (1991, 2001) evolutionary scheme, the fact that pictures as we know them today tend to be highly organism-independent and endurable artefacts

⁴ It would take us too far, in the present context, to discuss whether this critique of the distinction between oral and written culture (nowadays mostly associated with the work of Walter Ong and James Goody) can be generalized, or whether it only applies to some cultures.

does not necessarily mean that they emerge after language, and together with writing, within the stages of human evolution. There certainly may have been many pictures drawn in the sand and then rapidly deleted, just as they have existed in many cultures, and which are still employed to this very day, for instance by the Paamese, notably in the process of explaining genealogies.⁵ But it also seems to be the case that such sand drawings are far from corresponding to the ideal of full determinateness and density set by Lessing and Goodman. Sand paintings, at least of the Tibetan kind, seem to come closer to this ideal, even though they are entirely abstracts, which poses the question what they are depicting. At least for the case of Australian sand painting, Green (2014) has richly documented how they are used, always, it would seem, in conjunction with speech, gesture, hand signs and song, to tell stories, in such a way that “in isolation, each of these modalities does not carry the entire message” (Green 2014: 90). This is not a case of translation and/or transposition, but rather of a complementary use of different semiotic resources.

Nevertheless, pictographs, to use the term employed by Severi for these kinds of communicative pictures, can also function independantly of other semiotic resources, although more conventions may then be necessary. Obvious examples of such pictographs employed currently today are those present at airports and other places where people speaking different languages are expected to meet. It is also the case of Blissymbolics and other conventionalized kinds of picture signs, such as VIC and C-VIC, used to communicate with people who are unable to use language because of being attained by aphasy (see Gardner et al. 1976; Steele et al. 1989).

But a particularly interesting comparison can be made to the studies realized within the paradigm of so-called “experimental semiotics” (see Galantucci and Garrod 2010). The purpose of these studies is to find out how communication (and, notably, language) emerges in the evolution of the human species, by putting the experimental subjects into a situation in which they cannot use language or any other systematic means of communication, but are required to pass on a piece of information to other experimental subjects. Experimental semiotics has recourse to several different experimental layouts, two of which are referential semiotic games and coordination semiotic games. In the former case, “participant pairs are communicating about a closed set of referents with an open set of communicative forms while being prevented from using spoken or written language” (Galantucci and Garrod 2010: 2). The second case is different, because the set of referents in the coordination semiotic games is open. In both cases, nevertheless, the “openness” referred to is very relative, because,

5 Simon Devylder, personal communication, June 2018.

even in the latter case, some particular semiotic means, such as Pictionary (a series of standardized pictures), gesture, or the like, is used. This is very different from the stranded seafarer on his desolate island trying by any means possible to gather the attention from any ship passing in the neighborhood (see Sonesson 2019b). Nevertheless, it clearly is a situation in which pictures (or gestures) are used to convey pieces of information within a dialogical framework. No doubt this is how we should imagine the ordinary use of the Aztec pictographs. Whether this is also a way of using pictures gaining import on the Internet in general and, in particular, in social media, is something on which there is at present only anecdotic evidence.

7 Conclusions about cultural translation

At the onset of this paper, I suggested that translation and transposition of semiotic artefacts stemming from one culture to another – perhaps in particular from a culture in the process of being transmuted from being an *Alius*-culture into an *Alter*-culture – may have a pervasive impact on *Ego*-culture, at least when such a series of translations and transpositions accumulate over an extended time span, while at the same time these translational and/or transpositional events follow each other within a temporal horizon which can still be grasped by contemporaries and/or by overlapping generations of members of the cultures involved. This was clearly the case with the Greek heritage translated and transposed from Muslim culture (including its elaboration within Muslim culture) to Europe during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. European culture would not have been the way it is today, if this transposition had not taken place. It might be objected that this only applies to high culture. It is certainly particularly true of high culture, but there can be no doubt that the Greek-Muslim heritage as it was transposed at the time to Europe, and as it has been enriched since then, is the main ingredient in what we now recognize as European culture, also in the anthropological sense, that is, it stands at the origin of core European values (however badly they are realized in the real world, also in Europe) such as equality of all human beings, freedom of opinion, freedom of speech, and the like. No other human culture seems to have fostered these values. It is true that they only really became spelled out when the Greek-Muslim heritage in Europe reached the period known as the Enlightenment (see Sonesson 2016b, Sonesson 2019a).

In this paper, I have been discussing another encounter between cultures, that of a Europe already in the process of enhancing its Greek-Muslim heritage,

and another culture, independantly developped, that of the Aztecs or (more properly speaking) Mexicas, which had reached a high degree of cultivation, to the point that many observers at the time compared it to that of the Ancient Greeks. It is true that post-muslim Spain, at the time, was not at the forefront of those nations pursuing the Greek heritage, and it is even more certain that the Aztecs were newly converted Barbarians, in terms of the models of cultural semiotics, not only from the point of view of European Ego-culture, but also from that of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. At the moment of the encounter between Europe and the Americas, however, the Aztecs had for several hundred years been in the business of taking over the heritage of the Mesoamerican civilization, as it evolved from the Olmecs to the Mixtecs and the Mayas, while also amplifying this tradition in their own ways. Spain may have lagged behind the general cultural development of Europe at the time, but this cannot apply to all domains, for, as it soon turned out, after the conquest of the Americas, the scholars at Salamanca University were the first to be confronted with the task of deciding whether people living on a continent which, according to traditional views, should not even exist, were human beings, and they decided that they were, although this went against the interest of the Spanish crown, and, more obviously, that of the conquistadores and their offspring (see Sánchez-Blanco 1999; Sánchez-Blanco 2013). In many ways, the decision taken by the scholars in Salamanca may be considered to be at the origin of the idea of human rights, which the philosophers of the French Enlightenment took as their task to expound.

We should not forget that the network of communication worked fairly well in Europe at the time (although information took somewhat more time to spread than in our period of “social media”), which means that what was known in Spain was eventually also known in other parts of Europe. (Anecdotically, one may quote the case of Albert Dürer visiting an exposition of American paraphernalia, but, although his impressions are known to us, a lot of other Europeans certainly made the same visit). But the communal network in Mesoamerica was certainly also excellent at the time (see Thompson 1970). Serge Gruzinski (2004, 2012) has talked about “the impermeability of culture”, exemplifying it with the Iberian empires. This would seem to correspond to a model of culture where Ego-culture is only confronted with *Alius*-cultures all around. Such a description seems exaggerated and, in the end, misleading. Trivially, Europe received tomatoes, peanuts, potatoes and many other things from the Americas. At the level of ideas, there may have been less influence of the Americas on Europe, except for the very idea of their being alien ideas.

The Occident did not adopt the way of using pictures employed in Mesoamerica. But the shock of the encounter clearly had other consequences,

not bearing of the precise content of the transposition, but reacting to the fact of the transposition by widening the scope of what was receivable from other shores, without which the Enlightenment may have been impossible. And thanks to the Enlightenment, Europe has no doubt been the most permeable of cultures. One would have liked to say that Sahagún, very much in spite of himself, was at the origin of this process. His work combined what, at least in retrospect, seems a decidedly European idea of the thorough description of an alien culture, which he basically pioneered, with a production procedure which involved ancient handicraft techniques of the other culture, at least in the domain of picture creation. Unfortunately, as soon as it was more or less completed, Sahagún's work was seized by the Spanish Crown, disappearing until the late eighteenth century, when, in 1793, a Latin description of it was first published, and it only become widely known during the nineteenth century and seriously researched at the end of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, many friars, conquistadors and travellers introduced the New World to the Old one without disposing of the same solid, impeccable grounding on the subject matter.

8 Conclusions about picture use

Whatever else Europe took over from the Americas, it was not the everyday way of putting pictures to use. At the time of the first encounter between Europe and the Americas, these two parts of the world clearly entertained different basic ideas about the social function of pictures. Much more than in Europe, picture use in Mesoamerica formed part of the original situation of communication, that is, pictures were part of a dialogue having the purpose to convey minimal information of events and news. They were also memory devices and, in that respect, could participate in total semiotic acts involving also speech and/or gesture.⁶ As pointed out above, this social use of pictures has always existed also in Europe, but in a marginal position. It has gained momentum in the last few hundred years, since the existence of more and more rapid means of transport between different parts of the world have given rise to train stations and airports and other places where people speaking very different languages come together, and it has become ever more necessary to convey information using a simplified and largely codified version of iconic signs. This is a situation which,

⁶ One cannot help speculating that this may constitute a return to an evolutionary earlier use of pictures as ingredients of the total semiotic act (see Sonesson 2018).

mutatis mutandis, can be compared to the drawings sent by Moctezuma's spies traversing domains where many different languages were spoken, if that was really the use to which pictures were put in the espionage system. On the other hand, if we consider the employment of pictures in the creation of Sahagún's work, where they would seem to have the function of memory devices, which serve to instigate the engendering of communication using other semiotic means, most notably language, the assiduous observer of the Internet and, in particular social media, may gain the impression that pictures are in the process of regaining this role.

In any case, *Primeros Memorials* and the *Codex Florentino* in themselves, particularly when considered together, constitute an astounding accomplishment in the translation of culture in both directions, notably from the point of view of their process of construction.

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