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Metaphor Translation as a Tool of Intercultural Understanding

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Abstract: In her article "Metaphor Translation as a Tool of Intercultural Understanding" Ipshita Chanda takes up specific cases of metaphor translation as a methodological exercise towards understanding intercultural exchange. Chanda's study is based on a semiotic and linguistic understanding of metaphor as a signifying and cognitive device. When a metaphor is translated from one linguistic-literary field into another, the process of translation itself yields some specific operational steps for studying inter- and cross-cultural relations. Here, translation is not proposed as a framework but as practical method: the translation of metaphor becomes an exercise in strategy for the pedagogy of the comparative approach. Grounding the literary fields of source and target languages in the comparative study of cultures in which metaphors originate and are made to mean, Chanda argues that the methods used for the study of relations between literary fields may be extended to the study of cultural contact and exchange.

Ipshita CHANDA

Metaphor Translation as a Tool of Intercultural Understanding

I postulate that when a metaphor is translated from one language or literary field into another, the process yields some specific operations for studying cultural contact and exchange. Here, translation is not proposed as a theoretical framework but as practical method: I am suggesting that the translation of metaphor as an exercise may well be a part of the pedagogy of the comparative study of literature and culture. To put it more broadly, the translation of metaphor opens up the possibility of studying what Walter Benjamin called the mode of signification through a medium (*Origin* 45). I propose that the study of metaphor translation as a methodological exercise could work towards understanding intercultural communication and exchange.

In his *Rhetoric* Aristotle describes what linguists would call a pragmatics of metaphor: "What we like are those that convey information as fast as they are stated … or that our minds lag only a little behind" (III.10, 1410b14f.). Enumerating three different ways in which a metaphor may be constructed, Aristotle suggested that the metaphor provides, in some cases, a process of learning. Using *translatio* (the Latin equivalent of the Greek *metapharein*) Cicero discussed its semantics: metaphor originates in the need to express notions for which no words exist (III 155). This may be taken as the first step in understanding the function of metaphor. Translation brings two systems into contact: understanding and expression occur in two separate systems, one being "carried over" into the other. Keeping in mind the fact that this explanation of translation is itself a metaphor, we may ruminate on how metaphors can "mean" within and then across languages and cultures. What does it mean to "understand" one systemic formation from a location in another? The study of this movement between languages, cultures, and various media provides insights into the study of contact situations. The construction of metaphor in a medium or "coding" it in one language and its re-coding by the translator provides insight on operational procedures and thus processes of communication.

Before proceeding to the matter at hand, I clarify the terms "intercultural" and "intermedial," because they define the situations in which the practice and processes of metaphor translation are located. Chiel Kattenblatt defines intermediality as "those co-relations between different media that result into a redefinition of the media that are influencing each other and a resensibilization of perception. Intermediality, unlike transmediality, assumes not so much a change from one medium to another medium but rather a co-relation in the actual sense of the word, that is to say a mutual affect" (6). Contact may result in the formation of a text combining the semiotic structures of two media or changing the configuration of elements of one particular medium through the contact with another. In each case, as Dick Higgins points out, "one medium is present in its own materiality and mediality in the other" (51-52). This implies that contact between media and their mutual interaction or the reception of one by the other regulates the production of a text in the condition of intermediality. With regard to the "intercultural" and metaphor translation I use Anthony Pym's definition who argues that translation conventions should be understood as "intercultural" rather than culture specific (3). Thus, when an element operates not from the level of one culture or even from the level of the lowest common denominator of many cultures, but from artifical conventions which allow individual cultures to define themselves and determine their relations to other cultures, we may label that element intercultural.

Based on the above, I begin with the relation between sense and reference, so that we may understand metaphor, and then locate it in an intercultural and intermedial framework through translation. This is the procedure that will be followed in the rest of this paper. We turn first to an understanding of metaphor. Sarah Kofman reads Friedrich Nietzsche who analyzed the birth of the metaphor by saying that metaphorical activity is intuitive: concepts retain and solidify lasting impressions that are compatible with very many appearances and hence rough and inadequate to each appearance (144). Describing the three moments which turn an impression into an imitative expression and then into a concept, Nietzsche isolated the third moment when the word is imposed upon impression. He identified this as the moment when language and society intervene in the intuitive grasp of the world through what he called an unjust application of reason (146-49). The irony is of course that unless this identity of meaning is imposed through the imposition of the concept,

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there is no communication. The next question we may ask then is how does the metaphor communicate "meaning," a pragmatic question from the linguist's point of view. Donald Davidson postulates that "metaphors mean what the words in their most literal interpretation mean and nothing more" (32). This is a position opposite to the general view regarding the metaphorical function of language. For instance, Umberto Eco points out that "there is a metaphor every time something unexplainable happens which the user's language perceives as metaphor" (88). Davidson directly interrogates this very characteristic of inexplicability thus: "metaphor doesn't say anything beyond it's literal meaning, nor does its maker say anything, in using the metaphor, beyond the literal" (41). This turns us to the function of language, which is the medium for metaphor.

When two speakers from different languages point to an object, we may assume some neutral, ideally language-transcendent viewpoint from which the object as it is can be pointed at. However, in actuality, the object that each speaker is pointing to is not that ideal object but the object as it is conceived in his/her language and perceived through that conception: the object as conceived in his/her language implies a translation from the material to the linguistic. Roman Jakobson places this in the context of our analysis by insisting that "the meaning of any linguistic sign is its transfer into a further alternative sign" (139) and Kofman argues that according to Nietzsche the body and consciousness are two systems of signs which signify each other reciprocally, the language of one expressing the writing of the other (26). We may proceed to this inter-relationship between language and sense from the actual process of representation. The referential relation occurs between sign and referent. The referent represents the object. When signs function as words, they refer to objects but this reference is mediated by our understanding of those objects, which is conducted by what Gottlieb Frege called the "sense" (24). When we use the word "concept" we usually mean the totality of sense and reference and thus understanding a "concept" implies discerning the relation between sense and reference. How far does sense mediate the determination of the identity of the reference? But to what extent can we say that sense determines reference?

How do metaphors "mean? Davidson is of the view that, "as much of the metaphor as can be explained in terms of meaning may, indeed must, be explained through appeal to literal meanings of words" (35). In Eco's view, however, two things become different from themselves as semes acquire and/or lose their properties. This difference functions on the traces of each seme present in the hybrid that is created (96). This hybrid is the metaphor. The sense perception peculiar to one domain is used to explain an experience from another domain since the experiential domain to be expressed does not seem to be intelligible without this transfer. This hybridization takes sensual and conceptual experience beyond simple referentiality. Moreover, the metaphor in language use stands as witness to the moments when the speaker escapes the stranglehold of "concept" in the sense of Nietzsche and returns to what Nietzsche himself would term intuitive impression, still using the concept/word to mark the moment, thereby making the literal use of the word incongruous in its context of use. But had this incongruity not been noticed, would there be no metaphor? Metaphorical language expressions like head of the table or foot of the bed are called "dead" metaphors simply because blunted by daily use, they lack the emotional affect of metaphor. This seems to indicate that metaphors are pragmatic rather than semantic phenomena: they may simply die just because we do not notice them. However, semantically — even if we do not take cognizance of the fact that tables need to be likened to persons if they are to have legs and that tables are not persons in actual fact, the use of a part of the human anatomy to describe an inanimate object remains a particular kind of language use. One might, instead of diagnosing death to the metaphor, to borrow Jacques Derrida's metaphor (8) and say that the wear and tear of word-use deflects our attention from its work in the sentence — so we do not notice that rivers do not really have mouths like people do, even while we use the phrase "river mouth." Only when Homer uses "red mouth" for open wounds inflicted in battle do we notice that a similitude has been indicated: the same word, "mouth," is used in an unlikely place and it is the use that creates our astonishment, the effect that we have learnt to recognize as a metaphor. But without this simple referentiality, the metaphor would not function, since it is precisely because simple referentiality has an unusual effect in a particular context of use, that a metaphor is born. In other words, the transference of meaning from the context of literal use into another, where the literal use is not possible, creates a metaphor. Analytical philosophers like Davidson have asserted that metaphors do not claim truth value, since they literally mean what they say. If they did not say

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exactly what they meant in a context where they could not possibly mean what they said, there would be no cause to notice them. It is the context in which literal language is used that makes the utterance metaphorical. The emotive effect of the metaphor is gained by the violence that this usage does to the expression of reality.

How does the language user deal with this situation? How does language still convey meaning? We may answer this question by demonstrating the construction and then translation of a metaphor. Translation thus becomes a tool for simulating a situation of contact. To put it more directly, if we use translation as a method, we will understand, as Benjamin requires translators to do, the difference in the source and target languages in specific usage: over and above that, there is a level of 'meaning' that is objective, and transcends language. That is, in Benjamin's terms, pure language. The practice of translation goes against the grain of pure language, even while reaching towards it through the target language. Translation occurs in a situation of contact and reception leading to a recoding: from this emerges the translated text. This is the next step in our process: the interpretation of the metaphor within the protocols of the source language text followed by its recoding in the target language. The question that arises is — since the metaphor functions only as literal language — should metaphors be translated literally? This would call forth the concern expressed by Friedrich Schleiermacher in considering signification: "Each language contains one system of concepts which, precisely because they touch, join, and complement each other in the same language, constitute a whole, the different parts of which do not correspond to any of those of the system of other languages" (239). In turn, this calls for a located reading: the sign system that the text operates upon is part of the literary field. Again, this field is not suspended in a vacuum: the nesting culture of the literary system, in all its complexities, will weave the fabric of the text. In order to understand the weft and warp of this fabric, and then in order to create another piece that is a "translation" of it, we must focus on practice. On that metaphorical note, we may turn to actual examples.

The process of translation begins with understanding the relation between sense and reference in the source langauge. Jakobson describes translation as a linguistic act comprising three possible kinds of operations: interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic (114). I suppose that these levels were operating simultaneously. Derrida points out that the original figure is always sensible and material**:** it is not a metaphor, but a transparent figure equivalent to proper meaning (8). In other words, it at least approximates to literal meaning. Let us see how this could be the case. In Bangla, the description *shona meye* (golden girl) and *shonaar chaand chele* (a boy like the golden moon) are used routinely. It is easy to say that neither of these is meant literally, but that they can "mean" nothing unless they are taken literally. The figure is a comparison between the qualities of one or two sensible material things, first gold and a woman and second the particular kind of moon, i.e. golden and a man. The first contains a single similitude, the second two. How these expressions are transparent figures in respect to their meanings is not evident. One does not see the woman and gold as synonymous in the normal course: we are forced to ruminate upon the indicated qualities which they could share when they are brought together. Even then, what is the quality of gold that is ascribed to the woman? Could it be goodness, or beauty, or some other value? We would know the answer to this question if we knew the context of use and the implications of comparison with gold in the source language. We might translate it into the sign system of the target language in order to see what the results are. If we wanted to preserve the terms of the metaphor in English, we may substitute "good as gold," which of course is a similie, not a metaphor. There is also "worth her weight in gold," which specifies the comparison to utility, in whatever way utility itself is judged. This is a direct comparison — the qualities of the woman have a particular value which is equivalent to the value of a particular quantity of gold. Which of these is the apt translation is a choice the translator will make given the context of use in the source language. The literal meaning in addition to the context decide the meaning of the metaphor. If the resources provided by the target language can be used in the translation of metaphors such that the literal meaning is incongruous in the context of use, then a literal translation of metaphor, that is interlingual transfer, is possible. However if the interlingual transfer does not make sense in the semiotic system of the target language, the literal translation of the metaphor will not communicate meaning.

Since the context of use is what makes the literal meaning stand out as incongruous, the possibility of translation is also dependent upon the literal meaning in the source language and the

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context of use of the translated linguistic units in the target language. Without this relocation, is it possible to translate a metaphor, just as a collection of words, and still make it "mean" something? Let us consider the expression *shonaar chaand cheley* in Bangla. First the gender of the word "moon": Bangla as a language shows gender rarely in nouns and never in verbs, so to liken a man to the moon is hardly remarkable, unless in the target language, moon is gendered feminine, in which case this metaphor will simply contradict the literal meaning of the word in the target language. A similar thing is possible in Hindi too, despite the fact that moon has a specific gender there — male. *chaand sa mukhda* ("face like a moon") can be easily used in Hindi, even when it refers to a woman since here the specific reference is to a woman's face, a body part which in Hindi is gendered male. In Bangla, the equivalent expression *chaand much* ("face like a moon") may be used for males and females, but used more often for the latter. But what about a language in which moon is female or in English where the metaphor is not flattering? If that is the characteristic of the target language, then how will it be possible to translate the metaphor *sonar chaand cheley* into that target language given that here moon will be feminine and cheley is boy, hence masculine? How is the translator to preserve the context of use which will draw attention to the incongruity of literal use and hence produce the pragmatics of metaphor? Translating into a target language that shows gender when the metaphor in the source language is either not gendered or is neutral, the literal meaning of the context of the source language cannot be replicated in the target language for grammatical and morphological reasons.

Another problem of the translation of metaphor may be the lack of an element constructing the metaphor in the target language. The word *aanchal* (the part of the sari that hangs over the shoulder and can be used to cover oneself) or its equivalent in many Indian languages conjures up the associations of shelter, nurture, refuge, protection, maternity while a term for that item of clothing is lacking in Western languages. *aanchal* is untranslatable into a language that does not already possess an acquaintance with the sari of which it is part while it may have an equivalence in many Indian languages and can be used metonymically: for example, *abala jeevan hai tumhari yehi kahani; aanchal mein hai doodh aur ankhon mein pani* ("alas, the life of the weak, with nurturing milk in their aanchal and tears in their eyes"). The word *abala* is gendered female and is used in Hindi synonymously with woman. It literally means one without strength, the opposite of *sabal*, which means one with strength and is gendered male. Grammatically, both masculine and feminine negatives are possible, but in the pairs *abal/abala* and *sabal/sabala*. The masculine positive and the feminine negative are used commonly, hence the protocols of the language have come to define women with *abala* and men with *sabal* and this pair as socially, although not grammatically, opposed to each other. A literal translation of this into a language whose original culture that does not possess an equivalent for this dichotomy is difficult, but its translation into a target language that does not possess the very concept of *aanchal* is impossible. Since metaphors "mean" by appeal to an incongruity produced through the use of literal meaning in a context where the literal meaning does not apply, the literal translation into a target language that does not have the concept is not possible simply because of a cultural gap between source and target language. There is no possibility of connecting between sense and reference in this case as the reference does not exist and the sense therefore cannot be activated. Substitution with an item of clothing that covers the upper part of a woman's body and is used metonymically for her ability to nurture may be used in this particular case, but unless it carries the associations of nurture, the metaphor will fail to work. Perhaps nurture itself will have to be used — the connotations of the word rather than the word itself being the result of translation.

What does this tell us about languages as expressive media? One possible answer may be that we are up against the impossibility of translation because here we are faced with the inexpressible. This is the limit condition for translation, within which Benjamin's insights into the nature of languages in contact become the situation for recoding what has been understood in the target language text. In order to understand this recoding, I begin with the acknowledgement that languages by nature must be incommensurable: "For the phenomenon of incommensurability to be obtained even moderately and contingently, there must be pairs of conceptual frameworks which must have a common referential ground and yet must be fundamentally different in terms of their semantic organization. This in turn implies the existence of conceptual frameworks and further the possibility of their being

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relative to each other in some meaningful way" (Derrida 8). Translation allows a consideration of the resources of individual languages and their function as expressive media. The translation of metaphor requires the literally used words in the source language text to be replaced by words of the target language. What ought then to be the relation between the literal in both languages? Let us consider the metaphorical use of the phrase *mirch-masala* (chili spice) and the word "spice." They ought to be literally equivalent, since they "mean" literally the same thing: chili spice is the literal translation of the words from Hindi into English. So how will one translate "variety is the spice of life" into Hindi? For some reason spice and variety are simply not connected in Hindi, here the target language, and it appears that although the other associations of "spice" converge in *mirch-masala* or even in *namak-mirch*, "variety" is not connoted to in the target language. One can speculate about the general spiciness of Indian food, where blandness is not taken as an opposition to variety of taste, since variety of taste exists anyway. But we must remember that in English "spice" is metaphorically used to indicate a quality, here variety, difference. When translating into Hindi, we cannot call up "variety" as associated with "spices" in the collocations chili-spice (*mirch-masala*) and salt and chilli (*namak-mirch*). But spice's association with variety does not occur in any way in the target language and so how then can the metaphor be translated?

The literal meaning and the context of use together make a metaphor "mean" and the context of use in both source and target language may have a corresponding range: as long as usage of linguistic elements that make up the metaphor fall within this matching range, the translation of metaphor as metaphor is possible. If the context of use in the source language does not match the context of use in the target language, the literal meaning may be translated, but the metaphor as metaphor is lost, because that particular word or collocation may not "mean" anything at all in the context of use. Thus, for metaphor, interlinguistic translation will have to be contextualized: it is intersemiotic translation that is required for metaphor. It is possible to say this for all forms of translation: metaphor is a particular variety of use which allows us to discern an important methodological insight. This is that linguistic and semiotic understanding must be simultaneous: this simultaneity allows "meaning" of the metaphor to emerge and the interpretation of a metaphor demands an analysis of both of these levels.

Next, I consider intermedial translation with regard to the understanding of the limits materiality may put upon the movement between media, thus influencing the reception of the "source" language text which is in one medium by the grammatical demands of the target language recipient in another medium (on intermediality see also, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek, López-Varela Azcárate, Saussy, Mieszkowski <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/>). The actual language of both texts may be the same, but crossing the boundaries of one medium to enter another necessitates changes that underwrite the recoding of textual material across media. This is a different form of incommensurability — or one may say that intermediality could function as a metaphor for incommensurability, because here we see that the semantic organization of one medium and the conceptual system upon which it is founded is fundamentally different from the semantic system and the conceptual system of the other. So how does the human mind perceive symbol and relate it to meaning? According to Alfred North Whitehead,

> the human mind is functioning symbolically when some components of its experience elicit consciousness, beliefs, emotions, and usages, respecting other components of its experience. The former set of components are the "symbols," and the latter set constitute the "meaning" of the symbols. The organic functioning whereby there is transition from the symbol to the meaning will be called "symbolic reference." This symbolic reference is the active synthetic element contributed by the nature of the percipient. It requires a ground founded on some community between the natures of symbol and meaning. But such a common element in the two natures does not of itself necessitate symbolic reference, nor does it decide which shall be symbol and which shall be meaning, nor does it secure that the symbolic reference shall be immune from producing errors and disasters for the percipient. (6-7)

Whitehead proposes the following explanation for the recognition of the world — a metaphorical way of saying that perception "for the percipient at least … is an internal relationship between itself and the things perceived. In analysis the total activity involved in perception of the symbolic reference must be referred to the percipient. Such symbolic reference requires something in common between symbol and meaning which can be expressed without reference to the perfected percipient; but it also requires some activity of the percipient which can be considered without recourse either to the

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particular symbol or its particular meaning" (8). Thus the association of symbol and meaning, located in an interaction between world and percipient, leads sometimes to identifiable truth and at others to an imaginative construction, which is built out of the same materials as identifiable truth. Let us close with an example from intermedial translation: words are transposed into images in Nina Paley's film, *Sita Sings the Blues* (see in more detail Chanda <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/12>). Here, the Ramayana is told to an audience based in the US literally, as well as metaphorically. The film was not released, but was widely circulated digitally and and won a number of awards for the film's director Nina Paley. The genre of Indanimation represents Indian subjects being put in a Western frame. For my purposes here I focus on the episode of Sita's abduction by Ravana. Shurpanakha, Ravana's sister, is enamored with Rama and proposes to him when she sees him in the forest. When he refuses saying that he is already married, she tries to tempt him. Then, her nose is cut off by Lakshman (Rama's brother, who accompanies Rama and Sita to the forest) when she refuses to take no for an answer. Enraged, Shurpanakha goes to her brother — the powerful king of Lanka — and complains that she has been insulted and demands that Ravana should abduct Sita and avenge this insult. In the film, Shurpanakha uses these words: "Dear brother, Ravana, have you seen Rama's wife Sita…? She is the most beautiful woman in the world. Her skin is fair like the lotus blossom. Her eyes are like lotus pools. Her hands are like … from … lotuses. Her breasts like … big … round … firm … juicy … lotuses." On screen we see an outline of Sita drawn in ornate serious style, and lotuses keep popping up in place of the relevant body part as Shurpanakha's voice describes that body part, comparing it with lotuses. While this literally visualizes the metaphor, it also draws attention to the aestheticization of the human body achieved by "Indian" art in both verbal and visual media.

The use of the image of lotus for the description of Sita's physical beauty is attributed to Ravana when he first sees her. Maricha, Ravana's associate, takes the form of a golden deer and appears before the cottage of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana in the forest. Sita demands that it be captured for her. Giving in to her demands, Rama pursues the deer into the forest and wounds it. The deer screams for help in the voice of Rama. Hearing this, Sita, who cannot see what is happening but can only hear Rama's voice, persuades Lakshmana to go to his brother's aid. Thus she is left unprotected when Ravana, who has laid this plan, appears in the guise of a hermit asking for alms. This is a set description for the heroine's beauty in classical Sanskrit poetics. But the literalization of the metaphor into visual actuality raises another question. What is the difference between "literalization," i.e., taking the metaphor as "fact" or "truth" and "literarization," i.e., letting it remain as a metaphor? When there is a crossing of media boundaries between verbal language and visual medium, can metaphor lend itself to visualization without being robbed of the appeal endowed by literarization? Is a metaphor meant to be visualized literally or does it open up space for the human imagination, which is the crucial function of literature, the very attribute of its medium? This is one of the questions of aesthetics and technique that is posed by intermediality as the condition of being of an artwork. A transposition of construction principles, stylistic procedures, and aesthetic conventions means that one medium takes up or imitates the representation of another, as Irina Rajewsky points out (52). How are the representative devices of one medium affected when transferred to another? It appears from the example of the film that when a metaphorical representation which allows scope for the imagination is fixed as a visual image, this undercuts the power of the metaphor. This difference is based on the materiality of the different media in question and the text that crosses media boundaries provides us an occasion to understand and further explore such intermedial crossing and the aesthetic specificities of each medium.

For Paul Ricoeur, metaphor resides in coupling or yoking together. The being is the couple of that of which it is the equivalent. The metaphor must participate in two beings, the one and its other, by the fact of its resemblance. The metaphor, in Ricoeur's view, renders the literal interpretation ambiguous but offers the reader a new world fertile with interpretation (306). Whether this is "pure" excess is for the reader to judge. What is of interest to us is that this signals the incommensurability between languages and cultures, self and others which become visible only through contact. Emmanuel Levinas argues that an ethical act consists of recognizing and receiving the other as the other. The translator would desire to uncover the other as other in its proper space within language or within a signifying medium, such that the difference of signification, of the very mode of signification

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itself, may be uncovered. As Benjamin would have it, translation touches the source language text like a tangent, at a point, leaving so many other points untouched ("The Task" 22). Languages, and the lives they represent, are irreducible to each other although contact and exchange — which are not only possible but simply necessary for the continued existence of each. Hospitality to the difference that marks the other and the humility to live with this difference is necessary for the practice of translation whether it is across media or cultural and geographical space.

In conclusion, the (intermedial) metaphor as example makes clear to us how language functions in its own milieu and on its own terms: recoding metaphor in translation in the target language text then imposes upon the translator and the responsibility of transferring the source language culture through source language text to the target language. The use of metaphor in understanding is not only the modus operandi of representation in a particular medium, but also the act of transference of this mode of operation as a "convention" across cultures and across media. Thus, contact between two systems and the relation between them whether of hospitality and/or incommensurability is articulated through the translation of unique use of words in one culture to the cultural milieu of the other culture through language which is not one's own and the reason seems to be that it is incommensurable with what imagines as one's own. In reality, it teaches us that all human endeavor seems to center on the self, and directs it towards another self. This self cannot be "lived," but it is living in its own language and that is what metaphor and translation indicate. Theories too are located in the time and place of their production: do the theories proposed by the "self" not colonize the "other" to be understood?

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