Narratives in and of Translation

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Abstract. This article questions one of the narratives that dominate our disciplinary and professional discourses on translation, namely the narrative of translation as a means of promoting peace, tolerance and understanding through enabling communication and dialogue to take place. It starts with a theoretical overview of the dimensions and some of the main features of narrative, as defined in social theory. Examples of the role played by translation in constructing narratives of peace and tolerance, precisely by 'enabling' communication to take place, are then offered. The article ultimately argues that translators and translation scholars must resist the temptation to over-romanticize their role in society and must instead acknowledge the fact that they participate in very decisive ways in promoting and circulating narratives and discourses of various types – some promoting peace, others fuelling conflicts, subjugating entire populations and providing precisely the kind of bridging of language gaps that allow such atrocities to take place.

Generally speaking, our scholarly discourses about culture, language and translation are not intentionally or openly manipulative. This is not the argument I wish to put forward. But they are arguably disappointing in their attempt to explain away the politics of language and translation by portraying a world in which cultural misunderstanding is unintended, innocent and can be avoided once we are sensitised to cultural differences and have a well-trained group of professionals who can mediate between different cultures in a non-biased and responsible manner. More specifically, I will be arguing in this article that in attempting to theorise the location of translators within social practices, translation scholars have valorised the translator's role in society in somewhat uncritical and unrealistic ways.

Ultimately, my aim is to foreground the active role that translation and translators play in mediating conflict, especially at times of international political upheaval, and to find more realistic and nuanced models for conceptualising this role, based on actual rather than idealised practices and behaviour.

Narrative

Before I go on to query one of the narratives that dominate the discourse on translation, perhaps I should first offer a basic definition of the notion of narrative as I understand it, and illustrate it with examples of the real-life agendas in which we are all firmly embedded.

The notion of narrative has attracted much attention in a variety of disciplines, and has accordingly been defined in a variety of ways. For example, in socio-pragmatics and in the study of literature, 'narratives' tend to be treated as an optional mode of communication – a very powerful one, and central to the way we organise our lives, but nevertheless one of several modes we 'choose' from (narrative vs. argumentation, for instance). Approaches which treat narrative as an optional mode of communication tend to focus on the internal structure (phases, episodes, plot) of orally delivered narratives, and to stress the advantages of using narrative, rather than other modes of communication, to secure the audience's commitment and

involvement.[1] In social theory, by contrast, and in particular in the work of Somers (1997) and Somers & Gibson (1994), which I have chosen to draw on, narrative is not conceived as an optional mode of communication but as *the* principal and inescapable mode by which we experience the world. Thus, "[e]verything we know is the result of numerous crosscutting story-lines in which social actors locate themselves" (Somers & Gibson 1994: 41). Narratives in this view are public and personal 'stories' that we subscribe to and that guide our behaviour. They are the stories we tell ourselves, not just those we explicitly tell other people, about the world(s) we live in. It also follows from this that a narrative, in the social theory sense, is not necessarily traceable to one specific stretch of text but is more likely to underpin a whole range of texts and discourses without necessarily being fully or explicitly articulated in any one of them.[2]

Finally, within the social theory view of narrative, the emphasis in describing how narratives operate and how they impact our lives is not on their structural make up nor on their textual realization, but rather on (a) the types or dimensions of narrative that mediate our overall 'take' on the world, and (b) the features that distinguish a narrative from a story or chronology of events. Ultimately, as Bruner (1991: 5-6) puts it, "[t]he central concern is not how narrative as text is constructed, but rather how it operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality". From the point of view of scholars of translation and of language in general, this is a serious limitation that invites us to supplement the social theory approach to narrative with textual methods of analysis in order to offer a productive application of narrativity within translation studies. I will not specifically attempt to offer a textual model of narrative analysis in this paper, a challenge I take up elsewhere (Baker, forthcoming), but will focus instead on a brief illustration of how the notion of narrativity can be used to query our own discourses on translation.

First, to do relative justice to the social view of narrative invoked here, I continue with its own concern with types and features of narrative.

Types of narrative

Somers & Gibson (1994) distinguish between ontological, public, conceptual and meta narratives.[3] **Ontological narratives** are personal stories we tell ourselves about our place in the world and about our own personal history.[4] They are interpersonal and social in nature: "ontological narratives can only exist interpersonally in the course of social and structural interactions over time" (Somers and Gibson 1994: 61), but they remain focused on the self and its immediate world. **Public narratives** are, as their name suggests, stories elaborated by and circulating among social and institutional formations larger than the individual, such as the family, religious or educational institution, political or activist group, the media, and the nation. Somers &

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[1] "Our audience's critical response and soliciting of proof for truth claims are deterred in favour of an emotive engagement in the narration" (Georgakopoulou 1997: 13).

[2] Blommaert (forthcoming, 74) criticizes critical approaches to discourse, in particular Critical Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis, for focusing on text and the immediate event in which it is situated, and argues that a genuinely critical approach "must also be concerned with invisible, hegemonic, structural and normalised power sedimented *in* language and not only *through* language" since "language itself is an *object* of inequality and hegemony". This is similar to the point I'm making here, namely that a narrative analysis cannot be limited to a single text or event, because narratives are diffuse, amorphous configurations rather than discrete, fully articulated local 'stories'.

[3] The literature abounds with other typologies of narrative; I find Somers & Gibson's particularly relevant for my purposes.

[4] Mishler (1995: 108) explains that "the construction of a personal narrative ... [is] central to the development of a sense of one's self, of an identity".

Gibson give as an example of public narratives stories about American social mobility, or the "freeborn Englishman" (*ibid.*: 62). A more recent example might be the numerous and competing public narratives of 11 September 2001, or the war on Iraq: who is responsible, why did it happen, could it have been avoided, how many died, how well or badly are things going in Iraq, etc.

As social theorists, Somers & Gibson (*ibid.*: 62) define **conceptual narratives** as "concepts and explanations that we construct as social researchers", and go on to argue that "[t]he conceptual challenge that narrativity poses is to develop a social analytic vocabulary that can accommodate the contention that social life, social organizations, social action, and social identities are narratively, that is, temporally and relationally constructed through both ontological and public narratives" (*ibid.*: 63). However, it seems to me that it is both reasonable and productive to extend this definition to include *disciplinary* narratives in any field of study. Thus, conceptual narratives may be more broadly defined as the stories and explanations that scholars in any field elaborate for themselves and others about their object of inquiry. Some of these stories or conceptual narratives can have considerable impact on the world at large, while others remain limited in scope to the immediate community of scholars in the relevant field.

A good example of a conceptual narrative that exercised considerable influence beyond its immediate disciplinary boundaries is James Mill's *History of British India*, published in 1817. As Niranjana (1990) explains, this *History* relies on the translations of William Jones, Wilkins, Halhed and others to construct an image of the Indians (whether Hindus or Muslims) as insincere and untruthful. "Throughout the book", Niranjana tells us, "Mill uses again and again in connection with the 'Hindus' the adjectives 'wild', 'barbaric', 'savage' and 'rude', thus forming by sheer force of repetition a counter-discourse to the Orientalist hypothesis of an ancient civilisation" (*ibid.*: 776). Niranjana goes on to quote the German Indologist Max Mueller as stating that Mill's *History* "was responsible for some of the greatest misfortunes that had happened to India" (*ibid.*: 779). Here, then, is a good example of a conceptual or disciplinary narrative that managed to penetrate the public space and influence public narratives during a specific period of history.

More recent and equally pernicious conceptual narratives which have had considerable impact beyond their disciplinary boundaries include Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) and Raphael Patai's *The Arab Mind* (1973). Samuel Huntington, political scientist at Harvard University, classified world civilisations into distinct groups[5] with 'inherent' cultural characteristics (mostly conflicting with 'good' American values) and predicted that culture would replace ideology as the principal cause of conflict in the 21st century.[6] In a more recent book, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America' s National Identity* (2004), Huntington looks at American society through that same neoconservative cultural prism and elaborates a narrative of an internal clash of civilizations, arguing that the new war is between the country's white majority and its growing Hispanic population. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* has been a major reference point for the Bush administration, and the narratives it spawned have

[5] Western, Eastern Orthodox, Latin American, Islamic, Japanese, Chinese, Hindu, and African.

[6] Huntington's 1996 book and his earlier article in *Foreign Affairs* (1993) have been extensively reviewed. For a particularly interesting analysis of the limitations of Huntington's narrative, see Said (2001), who concludes that "the 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis is a gimmick like 'The War of the Worlds', better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time".

been directly linked to the official public narratives of 9/11 and the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq.[7]

Raphael Patai, who died in 1996, was a renowned cultural anthopologist and Director of Research at the Theodor Herzl Institute in New York.[8] Following the Abu Ghraib torture scandals in April and May 2004, Seymour Hersh of *The New Yorker* described *The Arab Mind* as "the bible of the neocons on Arab behavior. In their [the neocons'] discussions ... two themes emerged – ... one, that Arabs only understand force and, two, that the biggest weakness of Arabs is shame and humiliation".[9] Another article in *The Guardian* reported a professor at a US military college describing Patai's book as "probably the single most popular and widely read book on the Arabs in the US military" and went on to confirm that it is "even used as a textbook for officers at the JFK special warfare school in Fort Bragg".[10] Again, we see that narratives elaborated within the confines of academia can and do permeate public discourse and can further sustain long-term meta narratives, the fourth type of narrative proposed by Somers & Gibson.

Somers and Gibson (1994: 61) define **meta** (or **master**) **narratives** as narratives "in which we are embedded as contemporary actors in history … Our sociological theories and concepts are encoded with aspects of these master-narratives – Progress, Decadence, Industrialization, Enlightment, etc.". An obvious candidate for a more recent meta or master narrative is the public narrative of the 'War on Terror', which is aggressively sustained and promoted through a myriad of channels across the entire world, thus rapidly acquiring the status of a super narrative that cuts across geographical and national boundaries and directly impacts the lives of every one of us, in every sector of society. The choice of *terror* rather than *terrorism* is significant here,[11] and offers a good example of the discursive work required for the successful circulation and adoption of narratives. 'Terrorism' refers to one or more incidents that involve violence, and as such has a localised feel about it. 'Terror', on the other hand, is a state of mind, of feeling, which can spread like wild fire across all sorts of boundaries and encompass all in its grip. A narrative must have this type of temporal and physical breadth, as well as sense of inevitability or inescapability, to qualify as a meta or master narrative. *Terror* indexes these features much better than *terrorism*.

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[7] In his earlier article on the same theme published in the influential *Foreign Affairs* journal in 1993, Huntington explicitly argued that "[i]n this emerging era of cultural conflict the United States must forge alliances with similar cultures and spread its values wherever possible. With *alien* civilizations the West must be accommodating if possible, but *confrontational* if necessary". See http://www.foreignaffairs.org/19930601faessay5188/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations.html; emphasis added.

[8] Interestingly, from our point of view as translation studies scholars, Patai was also a translator, like most cultural anthropologists. One of his books, *Arab Folktales from Palestine and Israel* (1988), consists of his translation, with extensive commentary, of 28 tales from the region. One reviewer enthusiastically describes it as "A meticulous rendering of the Arabic text of folktales into equivalent English expressions which provide the exuberant meaning implied in the Arabic text". See http://wsupress.wayne.edu/judaica/folklore/pataiafpi.htm.

[9] Seymour Hersh, "The Gray Zone", *The New Yorker*, 15 May 2004 (see http://newyorker.com/fact/content/?040524fa_fact). For an interesting rebuttal by Patai's daughters, 'Misreading the Arab Mind', see http://mailman.lbo-talk.org/pipermail/lbo-talk/Week-of-Mon-20040531/011965.html. They argue that "Scholarly research can be used or misused in ways the author never intended and would never have condoned". This is true of all narratives, but particularly of conceptual narratives.

[10] "It's best use is as a doorstop", Brian Whitaker, *The Guardian*, 24 May 2004.

[11] I am grateful to Maria Pavesi of the University of Pavia in Italy for alerting me to this distinction.

Features of narrative

Somers & Gibson (1994) and Somers (1997) focus on four defining features of narrative: relationality, causal emplotment, selective appropriation and temporality. Bruner (1991) discusses a more extensive set of features, in more detail.[12] For the purposes of this article, I will limit the discussion to the features proposed in Somers & Gibson, adding to them one particularly important feature from Bruner, namely *narrative accrual*.

Relationality entails that it is impossible to make sense of an isolated event, and that for an event to be 'interpreted' it has to be conceived as an episode, one part of a larger configuration of events: "narrativity demands that we discern the meaning of any single event only in temporal and spatial relationship to other events" (Somers 1997: 82) and "renders understanding only by connecting (however unstably) parts to a constructed configuration or a social network (however incoherent or unrealisable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices" (Somers and Gibson 1994: 59). Thus, for example, as Clifford (1998: 689) points out, in Maurice Leenhardt's[13] translation of the Bible into Houailou (a Melanesian language) "there could be no simple importation of a Western divinity into a Melanesian religious landscape". The relationality of narratives cannot allow such straightforward importation of 'parts' from other narratives. Another anthropolgist, Godfrey Lienhardt, considered "the problem of describing to others how members of a remote tribe think" as "one of translation", and insisted that "[i]t is when we try to contain the thought of a primitive[14] society in our language and categories, without also modifying these in order to receive it, that it begins in part to lose the sense it seemed to have" (1956/1967: 97). Were it possible to isolate parts of a narrative and interpret them without reference to a constructed configuration, and were it possible to interpret other narratives without simultaneously accommodating them to our own narratives and accommodating our own narratives to them, translation and ethnography would indeed be much simpler and less involved acts. But narrativity being what it is, the translator and ethnographer both necessarily reconstruct narratives by weaving together relatively or considerably new configurations in every act of translation.

While relationality means that every event has to be interpreted within a larger configuration of events, *causal emplotment* "gives significance to independent instances, and overrides their chronological or categorical order" (Somers 1997: 82). It is causal emplotment that allows us to make *moral* sense of events, because it enables us to account for *why* things happened the way a given narrative suggests they happened. Thus, two people may agree on a set of 'facts' or independent events but disagree strongly on how to interpret them in relation to each other. For instance, many people accept that Israel is occupying Palestinian land; that Israel is undertaking targeted assassinations; that Palestinian suicide bombers are killing Israeli citizens as well as soldiers; etc. But in some narratives, Israeli targeted assassinations are a response to Palestinian terror, while in others Palestinian suicide bombing is a

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[12] These are: narrative diachronicity; particularity; intentional state entailment; hermeneutic composability; canonicity and breach; referentiality; genericness; normativeness; context sensitivity and negotiability; and narrative accrual.

[13] Maurice Leenhardt (1878-1954) was a French Protestant missionary and anthropologist who did fieldwork among the New Caledonian Kanak in Melanesia from 1902 to 1926 and engaged in a passionate defence of their rights.

[14] In spite of the loaded vocabulary, which was part of the narrative of anthropology at the time, Leenhardt actually argues that "any historical sense of proportion ... reminds us that it is some of our own habits of thought which are newly-formed and uncommon" and that "a satisfying representation of reality may be sought in more than one way, that reasoning is not the only way of thinking, that there is a place for meditative and imaginative thought" (*ibid.*: 95).

desperate and inevitable outcome of Israeli state terrorism. Causal emplotment thus allows us to take the same set of events and weave them into very different 'moral' stories.

Finally, emplotment clearly also means that constructing a narrative can only proceed by *selective appropriation* of a set of events or elements from the vast array of open-ended and overlapping events that constitute experience. Thus, to elaborate a coherent narrative it is inevitable that some elements of experience are excluded and others privileged. Public narratives promoted by powerful institutions such as the state or media not only highlight those elements they selectively appropriate, but also force them on our consciousness through repeated exposure. This leads to what Bruner (1991: 18) describes as *narrative accrual*, the process of repeated exposure to a narrative or set of narratives leading to the shaping of a culture, tradition, or history. Bruner offers the example of the legal system, explaining that "[i]nsofar as the law insists on such accrual of cases as "precedents," and insofar as "cases" are narratives, the legal system imposes an orderly process of narrative accrual" (*ibid.*). Ultimately, it is this feature of narrative accrual that enables the spread of meta or master narratives of progress, enlightenment, global terror, Western democracy, etc.

It goes without saying that narratives do not travel across linguistic and cultural boundaries, and certainly do not accrue and develop into global meta narratives, without the direct involvement of translators and interpreters. In what follows, I would like to use this theoretical introduction as a backdrop to draw attention to one example of the way in which our own conceptual narratives in translation studies seem to be at odds with narrative theory as explained above, and with documented involvement of translators and interpreters in a variety of conflicting global narratives.

Narratives in translation studies

In translation studies today, we have a master narrative of the translator as an honest intermediary, with translation repeatedly portrayed as a force for good, a means of enabling dialogue to take place between different cultures and therefore (the logic goes) improving the ability of members of these different cultures to understand each other. Thus, communication, dialogue, understanding, and indeed knowledge are assumed to be 'good' in a moral sense. They lead – unproblematically – to justice, peace, tolerance, progress.

As is the case with narratives in general, a number of interesting metaphors underpin the narrative of translation (and translators) as a force for good. These are too numerous and pervasive to take up in detail here. For the purposes of this article, I'll mention only the metaphor of translation as bridge and the translator as bridge builder, which we have always understood in positive terms. No one questions whether bridges are always built for the (morally) 'right' reasons, nor the fact that just as they might allow us to cross over and make positive contact with a different culture, they also allow invading troops to cross over and kill, maim and destroy entire populations. Similarly with the issue of 'enabling communication'. A programme on Iraq televised on British television in October 2003 showed a US army officer standing by the bedside of a wounded Iraqi citizen and speaking to him through an interpreter. The interpreter was indeed 'enabling communication' to take place between the two parties, but given that the US officer was explaining to the wounded Iraqi man that he has only two choices, cooperate with the US army and live or fail to cooperate and be left to die, it is difficult to see how this 'enabling' role might be reconciled with the bridge building, 'doing good' narrative of translation.

The type of discourse that focuses on translators as 'enablers' of communication and dialogue is permeated by an assumption of 'misunderstanding' as unintentional and completely separate from political and economic agendas. This narrative, I would argue, obscures the real issues in situations of conflict and the complex role that translators play in these situations. It further ignores the deliberate 'will to misunderstand', and the frequent resort to translation to promote narratives that many translators who think of translation as being a force for good would not dream of sanctioning. Here is one example.

On 12 August 2002, Brian Whitaker published an article in the *Guardian* under the title 'Selective Memri' which started as follows:

> For some time now, I have been receiving small gifts from a generous institute in the United States. The gifts are high-quality translations of articles from Arabic newspapers which the institute sends to me by email every few days, entirely free-of-charge.   ... The emails also go to politicians and academics, as well as to lots of other journalists. The stories they contain are usually interesting. ... Whenever I get an email from the institute, several of my Guardian colleagues receive one too and regularly forward their copies to me - sometimes with a note suggesting that I might like to check out the story and write about it.

The organisation that Whitaker alerted us to was set up by a former member of the Israeli intelligence service. And as Whitaker points out, "the stories selected by Memri for translation follow a familiar pattern: either they reflect badly on the character of Arabs or they in some way further the political agenda of Israel". MEMRI's own site (http://memri.org/aboutus.html) describes the organisation as follows – interestingly making explicit use of the bridge metaphor:

> The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) explores the Middle East through the region's media. MEMRI bridges the language gap which exists between the West and the Middle East, providing timely translations of Arabic, Farsi, and Hebrew media, as well as original analysis of political, ideological, intellectual, social, cultural, and religious trends in the Middle East.
>   Founded in February 1998 to inform the debate over U.S. policy in the Middle East, MEMRI is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit, 501 (c)3 organization. MEMRI's headquarters is located in Washington, DC with branch offices in Berlin, London, and Jerusalem, where MEMRI also maintains its Media Center. MEMRI research is translated to English, German, Hebrew, Italian, French, Spanish, Turkish, and Russian.[15]

The press reports on the organisations's work, proudly quoted by MEMRI on its site, confirm Whitaker's analysis of the type of narrative that MEMRI's translations seek to promote. Here are a couple of examples:

> "MEMRI, the indispensable group that translates the ravings of the Saudi and Egyptian press..." *Weekly Standard, April 28, 2003*

> "www.memri.org - What they do is very simple, no commentary nothing else. What they do is they just translate what the Saudis say in the mosques, say in their newspapers, say in government pronouncements, say in their press." *October 1, 2002, BBC*

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[15] But interestingly, of course, not into Arabic.

Here then is a full-blown programme of demonisation of a particular group which relies almost totally on translation. Indeed, in rebutting Whitaker's attack the following day, the founder of MEMRI says: "Monitoring the Arab media is far too much for one person to handle. We have a team of 20 translators doing it". These translators are enabling communication and building bridges, perhaps, but the narratives they help weave together, relying on narrative features like selective appropriation and causal emplotment, are far from innocent and, to my mind, certainly do not promote the cause of peace and justice.[16]

To go back to our own scholarly and professional narratives, there is no doubt that the uncritical valorisation of translators, translation, and even translation studies as a discipline pervades our professional and scholarly discourses. Translators are depicted in our disciplinary discourse as honest and detached brokers who operate largely in the 'spaces between' cultures. The spatial metaphor of the 'in-between' is particularly pervasive in more recent writing on translation and is completely at odds with narrative theory as detailed above.[17] It either locates translators, by default, within static and discrete 'cultural' groupings based on national, religious or gender affiliation, for instance, or in an idealised no-man's land lying between two such discrete groupings. Thus the idea of interculture is used to create a neutral space for translators to act as honest brokers who are not embedded in either culture, who can transcend any cultural or political affiliation, at least while they're engaged in the highly romanticised task of translating. As Tymoczko (2003: 199) has convincingly argued:

> Rather than promoting a view of a translator as embedded in and committed to a specified cultural and social framework and agenda, however broad, the discourse of translation as a space between embodies a rather romantic and even elitist notion of the translator as poet. If the place of enunciation of the translator is a space outside both the source and the receptor culture, the translator becomes a figure like romantic poets, alienated from allegiances to any culture, isolated by genius.

Finally, I would argue that by over-romanticising the role of translation and translators as peace-giving enablers of communication, we abstract them out of history, out of the narratives that necessarily shape their outlook on life, and in the course of doing so we risk intensifying their blindspots and encouraging them to become complacent about the nature of their interventions, and less conscious of the potential damage they can do. A narrative view helps us understand that people's behaviour is ultimately guided by the stories they believe about the events in which

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[16] In the same article, Brian Whitaker proposed that Arabs should also use translation to fight back against demonisation programmes of this type:

> As far as relations between the west and the Arab world are concerned, language is a barrier that perpetuates ignorance and can easily foster misunderstanding. ... All it takes is a small but active group of Israelis to exploit that barrier for their own ends and start changing western perceptions of Arabs for the worse. ... It is not difficult to see what Arabs might do to counter that. A group of Arab media companies could get together and publish translations of articles that more accurately reflect the content of their newspapers.

About a year or so later, an organisation called Arabs Against Discrimination was indeed set up, almost as a direct response to Whitaker's suggestion. This organisation too relies very heavily on translation to promote a counter-narrative of what Arabs stand for as well as expose the racism and discrimination practised in Israeli society (see http://www.aad-online.org/).
[17] See, in particular, the work of Anthony Pym (1998, 2000). For a good overview and critique, see Tymoczko 2003.

they are embedded, rather than by their religious or national affiliation. Moreover, narrative theory does not allow for 'spaces in between': no one, translators included, can stand outside or between narratives. Hence, a politically attuned account of the role of translation and translators would not place either outside nor in between cultures. It would locate them at the heart of interaction, in the narratives that shape their own lives as well as the lives of those for whom and between whom they translate and interpret.

Romanticizing our role and elaborating disciplinary narratives in which we feature as morally superior, peace-giving professionals is neither convincing nor productive. Instead, we need to recognize and acknowledge our own embeddedness in a variety of narratives. Whether professional translators or scholars, we do not build bridges nor bridge gaps. We participate in very decisive ways in promoting and circulating narratives and discourses of various types. Some promote peace, others fuel conflicts, subjugate entire populations, kill millions. Which discourses and narratives serve which moral or immoral agendas is ultimately a question of our own narrative location – what narratives we buy into, both individually and collectively. None of us is immune to this process. No one can stand outside all narratives, and there can be no narrative-free perspective on the world. Or at least so this narrative goes.

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