Lost in Translation Studies? Hollywood and the Question of Language

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Bob Harris (Bill Murray) is in Tokyo to shoot an advertising commercial for a well-known brand of Japanese whiskey. On the phone back to his wife in Los Angeles, he tells her about places he has been going to and the people he has been meeting. She offers the comment, 'I'm glad you're having fun' and his self-defensive reply is, 'It's not fun. It's just very, very different'. Harris's rejoinder in Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003) sums up what the main characters find most perplexing about this new environment in which they find themselves, namely, that it is, 'very, very different'.

Globals and locals

Translation as a named concern in contemporary Hollywood cinema is in a sense to be expected if the late modern world is working through the implications of current processes of globalization. Anthony Giddens defined globalization as, 'the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in a such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa' (1990: 64). One way of linking distant localities is of course to put them on our screens and the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has written about how the vast numbers of 'locals' across the globe watch a privileged number of 'globals' perform in the area of sport, popular music and cinema:

> In the Panopticon, some selected locals watched other locals…In the Synopticon, locals watch the globals. The authority of the latter is secured by their very

> remoteness; the globals are literally 'out of this world', but their hovering above the worlds of the local is much more, daily and obtrusively, visible than that of the angels who once hovered over the Christian world. (Bauman 1998: 53-4)

What these globals have to tell us about different locals and locales on a multilingual planet must inevitably engage translators as agents and translation as practice. If 'worldwide social relations are intensified' then one consequence is linguistic, faraway languages like faraway events are much closer and all of these new realities must be understood, both on the screen and off the screen. For local happenings to be shaped by events occurring many miles away, some sense must be of these events and translation, or indeed its failure, is an integral part of the sense-making process.

Bob Harris is a former 'global', a successful movie star from the 1970s who still has a sufficient aura of globality for a Japanese advertising firm to want to use his services. He has worked in the motion pictures industry and his work in Japan involves a less ambitious form of film making supplemented by photo shoots. *Lost in Translation* is saturated in the processes and products of image-making, whether it is the extended sequences involving the making of the short advertisement or the session with the Japanese photographer, the zapping through late night television programmes or the repeated snapping at the party held by Charlotte's (Scarlett Johansson) Japanese friends. As the taxi carries a jetlagged Bob into Tokyo city, he rubs his eyes at one point not only to emphasise fatigue but to express his surprise at seeing his image on a large billboard advertising a drink, a global offered up for visual consumption by locals. The fundamental preoccupation with image has a clear parallel with the construction of Japanese reality on the screen. The long opening sequence taking Bob Harris from the

airport to his hotel in downtown Tokyo is mirrored by an equally extended sequence at the end of the film bringing Harris from his hotel to the airport. In both sequences, the camera pans not only the buildings of the metropolis but dwells in particular on the neon signs and advertisements in the Japanese language.

Tokyo is a strikingly visual experience and therefore appropriate to cinematographic treatment but part of the visual experience is the writing system of the language itself, the characters of a non-Latin alphabet. For the Western traveller, the disorientation is complete. If Bob and Charlotte are partly adrift in their sense of personal crisis – Charlotte with her young husband, John (Giovanni Ribisi) and Bob with his wife of twenty-five years standing – the sense of dislocation is compounded by their being in a culture and language not their own. What becomes quickly apparent is that though Bob, Charlotte's husband, John, and many other characters in the film work with images, there is a reality beyond (and a context for) images which immediately brings questions of language and translation to the fore. Martin Heidegger's claim that the "fundamental act of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture" (Heidegger 1977: 134) is hardly surprising given the centrality of seeing to the rise of Western science. As we noted in chapter one, relying on the testimony of the eyes rather than the authority of texts became of the touchstone of the new scientific method championed by Francis Bacon and others (Rorty 1980). The importance of ocularcentrism was relayed by the development and enhancement of optical instruments such as the microscope and telescope. Literacy and the advent of printing gave further impetus to visualised and spatialised perceptions of experience (Ong 1989). In more recent times, the process of commodification itself has a strong visual correlate as noted by Eamonn Slater:

> As the process of commodification penetrates deeper into the cultural realms of society, commodity production takes on a more visual character: this corresponds to a process of *visualisation*. Images and visual symbols become the universal language of commodity production across national boundaries. Television, movies and the advertising industry can replicate images endlessly and beam them virtually anywhere (his emphasis) (Slater 1998: 4).

Bob Harris is integral part of this process of visualisation, his image enjoying a global currency whether it appears in the film on a billboard or on the side of an articulated truck.

The limits to this process, however, are underlined in two major scenes in *Lost in Translation* which are primarily concerned with visual construction. In the first scene Harris is being directed in an advertisement for *Santory* whiskey. The scene opens with whispered voices in Japanese saying that an interpreter is needed. When an interpreter is found, the Director talks directly to Bob in Japanese explaining to him where he is, to look at the whiskey bottle, to express emotion in a slow, gentle fashion as if the whiskey was an old friend he was meeting again and then he suggests an analogy with Humphrey Bogart. He emphasises the importance of the product and slogan by making an emphatic gesture and saying 'Santory time'. Only after this extended passage in Japanese does the interpreter, Ms. Kawasaki (Akiko Takeshita) begin to translate. Her translation is extremely summary and she simply says, 'He wants you to turn, looking at camera'. Harris's bemused comment is, 'That's all he said?' to which the interpreter not wholly truthfully replies, 'Yes, turn to camera'. Harris then wants to know whether he should turn from the right or from the left. The interpreter is voluble in making the request to the Director, again to Harris's surprise, particularly as he does not then understand why the Director who has told the interpreter in

Japanese that he does not care from which direction Harris turns, and that they are under time pressure, should once again launch into a long explanation in Japanese about the nature of the emotion he wants Harris to experience as he savours Santory whiskey before the camera. The interpreter once more radically abbreviates the extended passage by saying to Harris, 'Right side and with intensity'. The puzzled American actor protests, 'Is that everything? It seems like he said a lot more than that' but his protests are to no avail as two further explanations by the Director are interpreted as 'like an old friend and into the camera' and 'could you do it slower' and 'more intensity'.

A notable feature of the scene is that the Director is intent on communicating directly with Harris and pays scant attention to the presence of the interpreter. When she does directly address the Director, he shows signs of barely concealed impatience. The direct address suggests at one level the making invisible of the all too visible translator or a gendered relation of power with male director and female interpreter (the male director only feels comfortable speaking to the male actor) but at another level, such behaviour is perfectly normal as it is commonplace in bilateral situations for participants to try and construe some form of direct communication with each other (Wadensjö 1998). The effect on screen, however, is to project the non-Japanese speaking spectator into the position of the actor who is not so much lost in translation as lost for the want of translation. Harris may understand the technical language of his trade (where to look, camera angles and so on) but he is utterly at a loss to understand what is going on the language of the studio. The extended passages of speech before the consecutive interpretation and the clear incompetence of the interpreter make manifest not only Harris's dependency on the skills and the good offices of the interpreter but the reliance of the successful outcome of the

advertisement on the effectiveness of the translation. The director is extremely unhappy with Harris's performance on screen because he is not expressing the specific emotion he wants associated with Hibiki whiskey in the Santory range, an emotion that the interpreter is unable to successfully translate into English. The images fail to convince because the words are found wanting. The global is lost in the language of the locals.

It is possible, of course, to treat the scene as simply another example of a well-established Anglophone comic routine of decent chaps encountering Funny Foreigners. Language opacity heightens the importance of gesture and gesticulating foreigners speaking barbarous tongues are, of course, seen to be irresistibly comic. There is however a dimension to the translation performance in the scene which has implications not only for how translation is portrayed but for what its significance might be in a globalised world. As we noted earlier the main stumbling block for the interpreter is that she fails to communicate to Bob Harris the precise nature of the emotion he should portray drinking Hibiki whiskey. As the director tirelessly points out, a sense of prestige, of sharing exclusive company, of seasoned familiarity are crucial to the brand image of the whiskey. Branding is of course a salient feature of globalization and what brands trade on is less the intrinsic material value of the product than the associated cultural image or emotional value (Urry and Lash 1994). So brands are associated with emotions of psychological or physical or social wellbeing. The difficulty, of course, is that for emotional resonance to be effective it must first be understood and emotions are conventionally assumed to be what it is most difficult to express in language ('words failed me'). In a sense, though the interpreter can be faulted for bringing the profession into disrepute by her poor performance on camera, the dilemma highlighted in the scene is an important one. Not only the American actor but the Japanese

interpreter has great difficulty in communicating a precise quality of emotion. The fate of the image (the advertisement, the brand) is inextricably bound up with the fortunes of the word. The inexorable logic of visualisation and the irresistible rise of the brand image can suggest a centripetal version of globalisation as a gallery of images, freed from the nets of language by the universal currency of the gaze. *Lost in Translation* suggests otherwise by reminding spectators of the intractable, local realities of translation on a multilingual planet. Indeed, it is one of the many ironies of the scene that it demonstrates so clearly that the only way a 'global' icon (Bob Harris) can function in 'local' settings is through a firm embedding through language of the experiences and expectations of locals. What the studio scene makes obvious is what is less obvious in the visual sleight-of-hand of the brand, the mark of translation.

The advertisement scene is in essence a film within a film. It functions as a commentary on the making of the film *Lost in Translation* itself in that it foregrounds what happens when the business of filmmaking encounters the irreducible realities of language and culture. In this reflexive moment, not only do we see cameramen, sound operators, and the other members of the production crew but we also observe the work of translation negotiating a linguistic and cultural divide. That this should be so is hardly surprising as Bill Murray commented in an interview that the 'bilingual challenge of working in Tokyo was significant' and he in fact compares the making of the film to a 'war' where he claimed that it 'seemed like you could never make yourself understood' (Murray and Coppola 2003). Even if the military analogy is illuminating but unfortunate Murray's comments on the challenges faced by a relatively small crew working on a tight budget points to the omnipresence of translation as a concern not just for what the film talks about but how films

come to be made. As the film is shot primarily on location, the politics of location are inescapable. In other words, if in Murray's words, the crew often felt like 'a fish out of water' and knew themselves to be 'a long way from home', this was an explicit admission that filmmaking cannot massage context out of the picture. The plethora of misunderstandings in the failed advertisement episode bring context into the text. Translation is not a peripheral concern for local operatives but a central issue that confounds any easy optimism on the universality of the language of image.

The second major scene in *Lost in Translation* involving the process of visualisation is an extended photo shoot where the dialogue centres on exchanges between Bob Harris and the Japanese stills photographer (Tetsuro Naka). The scene opens again with the exposure of the artifice of image as Harris is shown being prepared and made up for the photo shoot. The studio is crowded with the people and equipment necessary to make the shoot possible. However, in this scene, a notable absence is the interpreter. There is no one on hand to interpret as Harris and the photographer communicate in English. Dispensing with the services of the translator does not mean however that translation is no longer an issue, on the contrary. The photographer initially asks Harris, 'Can you put your hand, close your face.' The omission of the preposition momentarily throws Harris who does not appear to fully understand the request and then he replies 'I don't get that close to the glass until I'm on the floor'. Harris's absurdist literal rendition of the request is intentionally ironic but this irony is clearly directed to an external audience and not to the photographer who is left nonplussed by the remark. Similarly, when by way of cue for a shot, the photographer says to Harris, 'You wanna whiskey', Harris's literalist rejoinder is, 'This is not whiskey, this is

iced tea'. When the photographer urges 'I need more mysterious', Harris comments, 'more mysterious, I'll just to try to think where is the whiskey.'

The exchange is taking place in one of the global lingua francas of the fashion and entertainment business, English, but what is brought into sharp relief is the very different levels at which parties engage in the exchange. Each request from the photographer produces a moment of temporary bewilderment on the part of Harris as he is not quite sure that the words mean what he thinks they should mean. English may be the shared language but do they both know what they are saying when they use it? The requests are then followed by a metalinguistic rephrasing of the statement where Harris plays with the ironic possibilities of the language. This level of language play presupposes an easy familiarity with English and it is clearly indulged in at the expense of the photographer whose more limited knowledge of the language presumably obliges him towards a more restricted and non self-reflexive form of dialogue. Features of Japanese use of English such as r/l phonemic inversion ('Lat Pack', 'Loger Moore') and syllabic insertion between consonants ('Sinatora') are then introduced to the exchange where each time, Harris's initial bafflement gives way to his correcting the mispronunciation. If the photographer is in charge of the pictures in the scene, it is his subject who is clearly attempting to control the words.

There is no interpreter in sight but the effort of translation is audible. On the one hand, Harris is repeatedly unclear about what he is being asked to do and who he is being asked to imitate. He need constant clarification as if the process of translation was being mimicked in the action of repetition, rephrasing, reformulation. On the other, the photographer is clearly experiencing difficulty in trying to communicate in English emotional expressions or cultural referents that he believes necessary to the success of the

photo shoot. He too produces a translation effect through repetition of words or phrases (‘mysterious’ is repeated three times) and only the resultant poses of Harris can produce a confirmation that the message has been properly understood. There is, however, not just a dialogue going on between Harris and the photographer but between Harris and two audiences, the immediate audience in the photographer’s studio and the assumed audience of an English-language film called *Lost in Translation* who possess native speaker competence.

Harris’s linguistic knowingness as a mother tongue speaker is set against the more restricted use of the code by the photographer and this dissymmetry in mastery is then used as a comic subtext for the scene. When Bob is asked by Charlotte in a later scene in the film why ‘they switch the r’s and the l’s here?’, Bob’s response is, ‘you know, just to mix it up, they have to amuse themselves because we’re not making them laugh’. But laughter is rarely innocent and as Adam Phillips has noted, ‘the philosopher on jokes, and indeed the jokey philosopher, has to be mindful of the fact that the joke is always on someone’ (Phillips 2000: 348). Here English is performing its habitual role as a language of global communication but the repeated translation difficulties are foregrounded not so much as tragedy as farce. So if there are elements of farce who is the joke on in this film theatre of international communication?

The photographer is clearly set up for a fall with his repeated mispronunciations and grammatical solecisms and the character of Bob Harris is on hand to make sure that the Anglophone audience get the point through his ironic reframing and rephrasing. Thus, if English is the language globals speak then fluent speakers of the language possess the dismissive hubris of the guardians of the imperial tongue. That mastering a language is often

confused in the case of Anglophones with being masters as a result of speaking the language is clear in episodes in restaurants, Sushi bars and a hospital reception where Harris, speaking no Japanese, is abrupt and condescending in his exchanges with native Japanese. But there is another sense in which the joke is on Harris and his fellow Anglophones. The title of the film after all is *Lost in Translation*. What Harris and to a lesser extent Charlotte have to come to realize is that the spoken is constantly shadowed by the unspoken. A global language can only be global if speakers of other languages consent or are forced to translate themselves into that language, for whatever reason. Therefore, the fact of being able to communicate in that language is conditional on the relative success of the translation move. What Harris experiences in both the filming of the advertisement and the shooting of the stills is that there is no communication without translation and that the real loss in translation is a loss of communicative innocence. That is the notion that speakers of a global lingua franca can somehow expect to be readily and instantly understood across the planet sets them up for a fall as they are consistently wrong-footed by conversational exchanges where they get things wrong, completely misunderstand what has been said or respond inappropriately.

It is the 'globals' who can appear clumsy and inept as their belief in a monophone world, without the banana skins of language difference and translation, is soon shown to be comically naïve as they grapple with the refractory reality of the local. A scene which further highlights this dimension to language domination is set in the hotel gym. The gym looks remarkably similar to the type of gym found in luxury hotels the world over. Bob Harris is working out on an elliptical exercise machine which starts accelerating uncontrollably. The machine issues instructions in a Japanese-accented English which

Harris clearly cannot understand and the scene closes with him shouting ‘Help!’. The element of farce in the scene is grounded in the illusion of the global cocoon. Same high-class, modern hotel. Same well-equipped modern gym. Same language. But the joke is on the global as he funny walks into panic. The sameness is illusory as even the familiar props of global elite travellers turn bewilderingly strange.

Johannes Fabian has used the term ‘denial of coevalness’ to describe the manner in which Western travellers have distanced themselves in time from the countries they visit (Fabian 1983: 35). The Western traveller represents the here and now, the trajectory of the modern while the country s/he visits is frozen in time. The response may either be to condemn this time-lag as further evidence of the feckless backwardness of the natives or to sentimentalise the glories of past greatness and adopt an elegiac salvage mode. Either way, the Western traveller is confirmed in his/her ready identification with modernity. This manoeuvre is not possible for the main characters in *Lost in Translation*. From the automatic opening of the hotel room curtains to the highly sophisticated amusement arcades to the repeated panning of the Tokyo skyline, the Japanese capital is clearly not situated at a remote point in time from the advanced modernity of the travellers. Although Charlotte does visit an ancient monastery in Kyoto and witnesses a traditional Japanese wedding, the emphasis in the film is firmly on the technological sophistication of modern city and country (even in Kyoto, Charlotte is shown arriving on the high-speed bullet train) which if anything makes the principal American characters feel somewhat overwhelmed. What the characters are presented with is an advanced modernity but one embedded in a different language and culture. This feature of modern Japan is more troubling than the consoling fictions of the denial of coevalness. The country may be distant in space for the American protagonists but

it is not distant in time. Signs of advanced modernity are clearly everywhere. This should be a recognisably easy landscape for other moderns to navigate but it is not. Part of the difficulty, of course, is that modernity speaks many different languages. It is not because a Tokyo skyline bears a resemblance to the skyline of any large American city that the city will be any easier to understand or get round. The flashing Japanese characters in the neon advertisements are a constant reminder that there is nothing more unfamiliar than the seemingly familiar. Difference cannot be easily dismissed as inferiority which makes difference more of a challenge for the protagonists. When Charlotte is taken to hospital to have her toe seen to, the doctor (Osamu Shigematu) patiently explains to her the meaning of the X-rays in Japanese. The hospital is clean, modern and efficient but the limits to translation are the limits to Charlotte's access to this other, non-Anglophone modernity. As we noted in chapter one, Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt has described the emergence of 'multiple modernities' in the modern world:

> Modernity has indeed spread to most of the world, but did not give rise to a single civilisation or to one institutional pattern, but to the development of several modern civilizations, or at least civilizational patterns, i.e. of civilizations which share common characteristics, but which tend to develop different, even cognate ideological and institutional dynamics. (Eisenstadt 2000: 40)

Charlotte and Bob may find it difficult to make themselves understood in the hospital but they have no difficulty understanding that the hospital offers acceptable levels of healthcare.

The hospital as opposed to the hotel is where one is likely to find 'locals' rather than 'globals' and it offers a vision of modernity which is conducted in a language

wholly other than the English of *ER* (1994), the widely distributed American serial medical drama based in the emergency room of the fictional County General Hospital in Cook County, Chicago. If Japan's multiple modernity challenges any facile denial of coevalness, it is the necessity of translation which is a precondition of the multiplicity. Differences in language and cultural norms are not situated in a period vignette or a primitivist tableau but in the urban and institutional décor of late modernity. The 'sets' then may be familiar but the language of course is not and this is where global mobility meets the limits of local understanding. In a scene shot in a Sushi bar where Bob play acts with Charlotte's injured toe, he exploits the linguistic incomprehension of the kitchen staff saying 'they love black toe over in this country' and asks one of the staff for a sharp knife. He then comments that someone will eventually order 'black toe' (pronouncing the words with a fake Japanese accent) and rebukes the staff member behind the counter saying, 'What's with the straight face?'

The rebuke might equally be directed against Bob himself as the humour is predicated on a shared language and a stereotypical image of Funny Foreigners eating Funny Food. For the kitchen staff the behaviour of a foreigner speaking an incomprehensible language and playing with the leg of his dining partner is as odd as it is unpredictable. The straight face subverts any notion that humour might be universal by default or that actions stripped of their running commentary carry the same comic charge. Bob carries on the way he does in the full confidence that he will not be understood but if he was understood he might not feel so confident about carrying on. In a sense, in the knowing absence of translation, one potential defensive strategy is to make the intercultural weakness a comic strength. Douglas Robinson taking his cue from Freud has

noted with respect to projection how, ‘what we most despise in ourselves we repress and then magically “rediscover” in someone else’ (Robinson 1997: 122). Kristiaan Aercke extends this insight to the realm of translation and travel writing where he observes that in the case of the late medieval traveller Konrad Grünemberg, the latter’s reaction on attending a Greek religious service which he did not understand was to ridicule the body-language of the officiating clergy. Aercke adds, ‘Grünemberg translates his unstated frustration at his inability to speak or understand into the allegedly childish and uncontrolled gesticulation of the bearded (and therefore adult) men’ (Aercke 2006: 161). Projecting incomprehension on to the Japanese cooks is a way of compensating for Bob and Charlotte’s own incomprehension, trying, so to speak, to cut the losses of translation by passing the debt on to someone else.

In a film crowded with the apparatuses of communication from fax machines to landlines to mobile phones, the proximity of similarity sharpens difference. Whether it is Charlotte talking to her friend in the United States or Bob being reminded of his daughter’s ballet recital as he wanders through the streets of Tokyo holding his mobile phone, the implicit subtext is that ‘home’ is always a phone call or a fax message away. Talking to friends or loved ones is in theory a break from the incessant labour of translation in a foreign language or culture. Or more properly, it might be claimed, foreign languages and cultures as Japanese is not the only language in the film aside from English. Bob Harris finds himself, for example, in a sauna with two German businessmen (Dietrich Bollmann and Georg O.P. Eschert) speaking away in their language which he cannot follow and he himself makes conversation in broken French with one of the young Japanese partygoers in the nightclub scene. In the scene from *La Dolce Vita* (1960)

shown on the television watched by Charlotte and Bob in Bob's bedroom the dialogue between Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni) and Sylvia (Anita Ekberg) is in a mixture of Italian and English with Japanese subtitles. So Tokyo, not untypically for a modern metropolis, is a site of multilingualism.

The networks of modern communication which figure so prominently on the screen ought to provide a monolingual haven in the crowded, polyglot space of the foreign city. Here there is ostensibly no need for translation as the language barrier is no longer an issue. The drama for the characters is that no such certainty exists. As Charlotte rings her close friend in some distress because of the sense that her relationship with her husband not working out as she expected, the conversation founders as Charlotte cannot communicate her disarray to her friend. The friend assumes that Charlotte is simply lucky to be on holiday and away from the humdrum world of the everyday. Similarly, Bob's conversations with his wife Lydia (voice of Nancy Steiner) are largely failed exercises in communication. When he confesses at one point in a conversation with his spouse that 'I'm completely lost' it could be as much a comment on the failure of intralingual translation as a verdict on the difficulties of interlingual translation.

Globalized communication networks may bring people together virtually allowing them to inhabit the same virtual language space but that does not necessarily entail that the utopia of understanding is at hand. The physical 'translation' in space of Bob and Charlotte removes them from the everyday lifeworld of those close to them and this displacement brings with it a double burden of translation. Being away can lead to new experiences that reframe the familiar as foreign (Charlotte no longer recognises the man she married), and this new awareness needs to be translated into a language understood

by those left behind. Equally, being away means that the context of utterances are now the foreign reality and not the domestic reality which again requires translation. Bob follows his 'lost' admission by the claim that he wants to look after his health and that he no longer wants 'to eat all that pasta.' He wants instead to 'start eating Japanese food.' His wife is unimpressed and notes acerbically, 'Well why don't you just stay there and you can have it every day.' Eating Japanese food in Japan is not especially exotic but consuming Japanese food in a US context, however explicitly multicultural, is not nearly as banal. The technology of proximity is no guarantee ultimately against the multiple translation costs of distance.

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