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*The spread of ideas
in translation theory*

Revised edition

Andrew Chesterman

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Memes of Translation

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by Andrew Chesterman

Mememes of Translation

The spread of ideas in translation theory

Revised edition

Andrew Chesterman

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Preface

I see humanity as a family that has hardly met. I see the meeting of people, bodies, thoughts, emotions or actions as the start of most change. Each link created by a meeting is like a filament, which, if they were all visible, would make the world look as though it is covered with gossamer. Every individual is connected to others, loosely or closely, by a unique combination of filaments, which stretch across the frontiers of space and time. Every individual assembles past loyalties, present needs and visions of the future in a web of different contours, with the help of heterogeneous elements borrowed from other individuals; and this constant give-and-take has been the main stimulus of humanity's energy. Once people see themselves as influencing one another, they cannot be merely victims: anyone, however modest, then becomes a person capable of making a difference, minute though it might be, to the shape of reality. New attitudes are not promulgated by law, but spread, almost like an infection, from one person to another.

(Zeldin [1994] 1995: 465–466)

In Classical Greece the source of truth, knowledge, revelation, was the oracle. A person officially designated to go and consult an oracle was known as a *theoros* (θεωρός; Liddell and Scott 1940: s.v.). Interestingly enough, the same term was also used of someone who was sent to attend a festival in some official capacity. Yet another sense of the word is that of 'magistrate', and more generally 'spectator', or 'one who travels to see' people and places (ibid.). The *theoros*, then, was interested in truth, knowledge, but also in pleasure. The word contains a sense of rational judgement (as a magistrate's title), but the core meaning is simply someone who sees, who sees with a purpose.

From this noun came the verb *theorein* (θεωρεῖν) 'to see, gaze upon'. This seeing was distinct from older verbs of seeing, in that it emphasized the function of the seeing rather than the seeing itself. It meant 'to be a spectator', i.e. a spectator of something; it stressed the conscious, deliberate activity of seeing rather than some kind of purely passive perception (Snell 1975: 15).

And by this path came the noun *theoria*, (θεωρία) 'theory'. It carried both the outward sense of 'a looking at, a viewing' and the inner sense of 'contemplation, speculation' (OED, s.v. *theory*).

There is a delightful anecdote in Herodotus ([1920] Book I, §29–30) about the wise man Solon, who had come to work as a legislator for the Athenians, and

then evidently felt that he needed a break. So he left home and set out on a voyage “to see the world”, as Godley translates it. The original Greek literally states that he went out into the world “for the sake of *theoria*” – i.e. in order to see and contemplate.

It is in this sense that the term “theory” is used in this book. Theories themselves come in many shapes and sizes: some are a good deal more scholarly/scientific or more formalized than others, some are empirical, others metaphorical; some are at a high level of generality, others are more specific.

The book has three main aims. The first is metatheoretical: it offers a view of theory, in fact quite a few theories. It explores some of the main ways in which translation has been seen and contemplated, and suggests a conceptual framework within which a number of disparate views of translation can be linked.

The second aim is theoretical. On this level, I set out to develop a particular theoretical view of translation, one that has been greatly influenced by the philosophy of Karl Popper. I propose, in effect, a Popperian theory of translation. I also draw on norm theory and to some extent on action theory, in an attempt to weave various strands into a coherent whole. My fundamental building-blocks are the concepts of norm, strategy and value, plus Popper’s concepts of tentative theory, error elimination, and the evolution of objective knowledge.

My underlying metaphor for translation comes from the notion of memes: a meme is simply an idea that spreads (memes are explained in more detail in Chapter 1). The metaphor comes from sociobiology: ideas spread, replicate themselves, like genes do. My motive in using this metaphor as an umbrella-idea to cover many aspects of this book is to provide an alternative to the traditional transfer metaphor of translation. The meme metaphor highlights an aspect of the translation phenomenon that I want to foreground: the way that ideas spread and change as they are translated, just as biological evolution involves mutations. In this light, a translator is not someone whose task is to conserve something but to propagate something, to spread and even develop it: translators are agents of change. Translators, in fact, make a difference... The metaphor thus gives less priority to the notions of “preserving identity” or “sameness” which underlie the more traditional image of “carrying something across”, a something that somehow remains unchanged. I offer the meme metaphor as a helpful way to look at translation. If it works as a way of stimulating new insights, fine; if not, we can forget about it. The applications of Popper’s ideas do not depend on the meme metaphor; nor do my arguments about norms, strategies and values.

The third aim is more practical. Many practising professional translators are suspicious of theory, or may be of the opinion that there is no such thing as a theory of translation anyway. Translator trainees, too, often feel that what they need is simply more practice, not high-flown talk about abstract theory. In response to

such claims, I argue that a translator must have a theory of translation: to translate without a theory is to translate blind. I also argue that theoretical concepts can be essential tools for thought and decision-making during the translation process. My third aim is thus to demonstrate that translation theory can be useful – to translators themselves, to trainees and to their teachers.

The book thus attempts to cover a fairly wide field, but certainly not the whole of Translation Studies. In particular, I do not focus on the technical side of translation: computer aids, terminological databases and the like; nor on interpreting. Nor am I interested in giving prescriptive advice: my attitude to norms is descriptive, not prescriptive.

The overall movement of the book goes from theory to practice. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of the meme, borrowed from sociobiology into cultural evolution studies. By way of illustration, it discusses five “supermemes” of translation theory: the source-target metaphor, the equivalence idea, the myth of untranslatability, the free-vs-literal argument, and the idea that all writing is a kind of translating. Memes are then argued to exist primarily in Popper’s World 3, and a Popperian meme is introduced that will be a recurrent theme in the book.

Chapter 2 outlines the evolution of (Western) translation theory, in terms of eight major stages, each building on and reacting to its antecedents and overlapping with them. These stages are not transitory but cumulative, so that the present picture we have of the phenomenon called translation – the total pool of ideas about translation, as it were – is composed of strata from all the previous stages. The chapter ends with a review of some conflicting ideas about translation theory in the current “meme pool”.

Chapter 3 argues that some ideas about translation eventually become norms, and that norm theory provides powerful tools for thinking about both translation theory and translation practice.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus from product to process. Given that there are translation norms, how do translators seek to conform to them? This question is discussed in terms of the notion of translation strategies, which depend on and are oriented towards translation norms.

How do we assess attempts to conform to norms? Chapter 5 offers a Popperian approach to translation assessment, based on the view that any translation is itself a theory: a theory of the source text. As such, it undergoes the same sort of assessment, criticism, error elimination and corroboration as any other theory.

Chapter 6 is practical, pedagogical. It discusses what implications a Popperian translation theory has for translator training. What relation might there be between the evolution of translation theory and the maturing of an individual translator?

Chapters 1–3 thus explore how translation norms arise, and Chapters 4–6 discuss various effects they have on translation practice. Chapter 7 then focuses on the ethical values underlying the norms that govern translational action.

Update

This revised edition includes Update sections at the end of each chapter, where I outline some of the later developments in research concerning the theme of the chapter, and in my own thinking, since the book was first published in 1997. I have also made some minor textual improvements and corrections and added some later references to the text.

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Any remaining weaknesses or errors are of course my own responsibility.

AC, Helsinki, January 1997

Revised edition: Helsinki, December 2015

Survival machines for memes

1.1 Introducing memes

Translations are survival machines for memes.

Memes? The concept comes from sociobiology, where it was introduced by Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976). He explains how he wanted a term which would be parallel to “gene” to describe the evolution of cultural phenomena, which (he argues) are subject to the same kinds of Darwinian laws of natural selection as genes proper:

[A meme is] a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. ‘Mimeme’ comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene’. I hope my classical friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to *meme*. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to ‘memory’ or to the French word *même*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with ‘cream’.

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. (1976: 206; p. 192 in the 1989 edition)

Like genes, memes are replicators. Examples that Dawkins discusses are the idea-of-God meme and the Darwinian-theory meme. These ideas do not necessarily exist in identical form in different human brains, but there is enough similarity between, say, different people’s ideas of Darwin’s theory for them to have a common denominator, and it is this common denominator which is the meme. “An ‘idea-meme,’” writes Dawkins ([1976] 1989: 196), “might be defined as an entity that is capable of being transmitted from one brain to another.” The fashion for jeans, we might say, has spread like genes.

On this view, ideas that turn out to be *good* ideas survive; i.e. those that are conducive to the survival of their carriers: people. By analogy with biology, these are known as mutualist memes, being of mutual benefit to themselves and their

carriers. Bad ideas (at least in theory, and in the long run) do not last; they are parasitic memes, because they eventually kill their host. Of course, it may take some considerable time before bad ideas are generally recognized to be potentially threatening in this sense. If a meme is to survive, it must beat its rival memes, i.e. it must win new adherents, gain ever wider acceptance. In science, for instance, the spread of an idea-meme can be plotted via a citation index: we can see how a given meme starts to spread slowly, reaches a peak of reference-frequency, and perhaps thereafter fades again.

Dawkins argues that memes represent a new and different kind of evolution, although this evolution follows the same general Darwinian laws of selection, conservation and propagation as genetic evolution. Plotkin (1993:769), summarizing earlier work on cultural evolution, indicates the parallel quite explicitly:

[C]ultural units, which we can call memes after Dawkins (1976), occur in various forms; selectional processes then result in these units being differentially propagated by copying and transmission systems which move the units about in space and may conserve some of them in time. The differential survival of these units resulting from the action of such selection and transmission processes leads to changes in the frequencies of these units in the cultural pool over time; the culture shows descent with modification. In other words, cultural change is wrought by cultural evolution.

Memetic evolution can even counter genetic evolution: culturally transmitted ideas and practices can become more powerful than purely genetic pressures – an obvious example is contraception: cultural values and practices override biological ones. (For critical discussions of the parallels between genetic and memetic evolution, see Hull 1982, and the references in the Update section below.)

Like “gene”, “meme” is a concept that can be defined and used at varying levels of generality. However, I find it useful to use the term *supermeme* for memes at a particularly high level of generality.

Memes often occur in complexes, memomes, in mutual dependence with other memes. The idea-of-God meme, for instance, might thrive in complex cooperation with the patriarchal-authorities-know-best meme. It is often insightful to think of a theory (a theory of translation, for instance) as a memome, a meme-complex.

Ideas and conventions that survive many generations, and are successfully transmitted from one culture to another, thus prove themselves to be interesting and relevant to a wide circle of human beings. They become “received ideas”, commonplaces, *topoi*. They may even be felt to be good for human survival, in some way; at the very least, if they survive we can reasonably assume that they must serve *some* purpose which is seen at least by some people to be useful. At any

given time, there will therefore exist a *meme pool* of such ideas, just as there exists a gene pool of so-far-surviving genes. In fact, we could even define a culture in precisely these terms, as a population of memes (Hailman 1982: 232).

Anecdotal evidence of the influence of memes is suggested by an article in *The Economist* (February 9, 1994, p. 99) discussing candidates for modern wonders of the world. After listing the jumbo jet, the microprocessor, the telephone, the contraceptive pill, the oil rig, the H-bomb and the moon landing site, the writer proposes an eighth wonder that has also had immeasurable influence on modern life: Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (roughly: that we cannot simultaneously be certain about both the location and the momentum of a particle). This is an excellent example of a meme, and of the effect that mutualist memes can have.

Dawkins argues that human (and plant and animal) bodies are in fact survival machines for genes: they are the means whereby the genes ensure their own continuing replication, their own immortality. Human beings are also survival machines for memes, but they are not the only ones (although they are always at least indirectly involved in meme transmission). Meme transmission within a culture takes place through imitation and of course also through language. But for a meme to be transmitted verbally across language boundaries, if both sender and receiver lack the relevant multilingual competence there needs to be a translation. Indeed, the need for translation is a neat criterion for the existence of a cultural boundary (Pym 1992a: 26). We can thus see translations as survival machines for memes crossing cultural boundaries.

1.2 Five translation supermemes

Some memes encapsulate concepts and ideas about translation itself, and about the theory of translation. Let us call them translation memes (cf. Chesterman 1996a). These memes are one of the central themes of this book: the most important types will be theoretical concepts, norms, strategies and values. Chapter 2 will look at the evolution of translation memes, but first I shall introduce five supermemes of translation. They are ideas of such pervasive influence that they come up again and again in the history of the subject, albeit sometimes in slightly different guises. Some appear to be distinctly more beneficial than others.

1.2.1 Source-target

The source-target supermeme is the idea that translation is directional, going *from* somewhere *to* somewhere. The widespread acceptance of this supermeme

has, in modern translation studies, given us the notions of Source Text (ST) and Target Text (TT).

The dominant metaphor underlying this supermeme is that of movement along a path: cognitive linguistics would talk of a “path schema”, with the translation itself being the “trajector” moving along this path. Translations are thus seen as “moving” from A to B. Belonging to this same meme-complex there is also the accompanying idea that translations are “containers” for something else; as they are formed, translations “carry across” something from A to B.

This supermeme clearly captures something of value about translation, but there is one important aspect which it misses: although they are directional, translations do *not* in fact move. If an object moves from A to B, when it arrives at B it is no longer at A. But translation does not eliminate the presence of the source text at A. True, some source texts may never have a source readership apart from the translator, in that they are produced solely as input for a translation, remaining unpublished in the source language. Such a source text may therefore be redundant after the act of translation; it may only exist as a note in the translator’s file, or a deleted computer document (for instance, the Finnish original of an information brochure for foreign students in Finland, to be published only in English). But this is not to say that texts automatically cease to exist at their point of departure after being translated: normally, source texts do not then cease to exist.

On the contrary: a translation of a novel, an advertisement, a contract, or whatever, has merely extended the readership of (the memes carried by) these texts, it has spread their memes. But the memes themselves do not *move*: they are not absent from the source culture when they appear in the target culture. They do not move, they spread, they replicate. In place of the metaphor of movement, therefore, I would suggest one of propagation, diffusion, extension, even evolution: a genetic metaphor. Evolution thus suggests some notion of progress: translation adds value to a source text, by adding readers of its ideas, adding further interpretations, and so on.

1.2.2 Equivalence

The equivalence supermeme is the big bugbear of translation theory, more argued about than any other single idea: a translation is, or must be, equivalent to the source, in some sense at least. This idea too is based on the path metaphor, in fact on the trope of “metaphor” itself. After all, the very term “translation” in English and related languages has the same root as “metaphor” – carrying across. If your view of translation is that you carry something across, you do not expect that this something will change its identity as you carry it. A metaphor states that two different entities can be seen as identical in some respect: $X = Y$. Source text and

target text are “the same”. Exactly what this “sameness” consists of is, of course, open to endless debate.

One frequent ploy is to break up equivalence into various subtypes, for instance a binary opposition between two main types. Nida (1964) distinguishes between formal and dynamic equivalence, for instance, the former focusing on the message itself (aiming at the same form and meaning) and the latter on its reception (aiming at the same effect). The two types are not mutually exclusive, however; formal equivalence may exist (in theory) at the lower grammatical levels of morpheme, word, phrase, perhaps up to sentence breaks, while dynamic equivalence more naturally has to do primarily with the text as a whole (see Jakobsen 1994a). Other scholars prefer different labels but make the same basic distinction between two main kinds of translation: semantic vs. communicative (Newmark 1981), overt vs. covert (House 1981), documentary vs. instrumental (Nord 1991), imitative vs. functional (Jakobsen 1994a).

Other classifications have been more complex: equivalence has been split up into functional, stylistic, semantic, formal or grammatical, statistical and textual subtypes, and then hierarchies are posited which give some subtypes higher priority than others, under different conditions. (See e.g. Koller 1979; Retsker 1993.) Such priorities obviously depend on text-type, communicative situation etc. In literary translation, for instance, it is commonly assumed that there should be a “sameness” of image or conceptualization, i.e. a kind of stylistic-semantic equivalence (see e.g. Tabakowska 1993:72 and elsewhere).

Against this preoccupation with “sameness” alternative concepts have been proposed, positing a weaker degree of equivalence such as matching (Holmes 1988) or family resemblance (Wittgenstein 1953: §66f.; see e.g. Toury 1980: 18), or similarity (e.g. Chesterman 1996b): Hervey and Higgins (1992: 24) take a translation to be “equivalent” if it is “not dissimilar in relevant respects”. These reflect the pragmatic reality that, in fact, (total) equivalence is a red herring, in that it is normally unattainable, and hence not a useful concept in translation theory. Pragmatically speaking, it can be argued that the only examples of absolute equivalence are those in which an ST item *X* is *invariably* translated into a given TL as *Y*, and *vice versa*. In terms of information theory, the information would thus remain invariant under reversible encoding operations. Typical examples would be words denoting numbers (with the exception of contexts in which they have culture-bound connotations, such as “magic” or “unlucky”), technical terms (oxygen, molecule), and the like (cf. Retsker 1993; however, technical terms can also be slippery – see Kußmaul 1995:98). From this point of view, the only true test of equivalence would therefore be invariable back-translation. This, of course, is unlikely to occur except in the case of a small set of lexical items such as a finite terminological field, or simple isolated syntactic structures, set phrases and the

like (*auf dem Tisch* \Leftrightarrow *on the table*). The larger the syntactic unit, the less probable the possibility of absolute equivalence will be.

Some scholars have argued that the idea of equivalence is an illusion and should be abandoned (e.g. Snell-Hornby 1988). Others appear to define translation in terms of equivalence and equivalence in terms of translation, so that any translation is equivalent by definition. A non-equivalent translation, on this view, is a contradiction (cf. Toury 1980:70). If translation theory studies translations, and all translations are by definition equivalent, it might seem that we can dispense with the term altogether, and focus instead on the wide variety of relations that can exist between a translation and its source. Of course, we could call these relations ‘kinds of equivalence’, but then we are no longer talking about strict sameness. (But see the Update section at the end of this chapter.)

1.2.3 Untranslatability

This supermeme is closely linked to the previous one: if translation is defined in terms of equivalence, and since absolute equivalence is practically unattainable, translation must surely be impossible. Alternatively: it is assumed that equivalence is, by definition, perfect; but perfection, in practice, is unattainable. This is the problem at the centre of Mounin’s discussion (Mounin 1963). This supermeme constitutes the basic “objection préjudicielle” against translation (Ladmiral 1994:85f.). Another classical discussion of this idea is the famous essay by Ortega y Gasset (1937), who argues that translation is necessarily “a Utopian task” (although he goes on to say that in this respect, translation is like many other human activities and aspirations, including communication in one’s mother tongue).

This view has been held particularly with respect to literary translation: a typical example is Friedrich (1965), whose starting-point is what he takes to be the “reality” of untranslatability from one language to another. This fundamental untranslatability is simply assumed by Friedrich as given, although the rest of the essay of course belies this belief, in that it discusses literary translation as something that does nevertheless take place.

Another classical variant of this supermeme is the traditional argument that poetry is untranslatable. “Poetry by definition is untranslatable” claims Jakobson ([1959] 1989:59–60) – despite the fact that poetry is of course translated. Such views are obviously linked to the equivalence supermeme: no “translation” that is not totally equivalent *is* a translation.

There are interesting religious and philosophical roots underlying this supermeme. One is the Biblical legend of the Tower of Babel (taken up again by Derrida 1985), the myth explaining why human beings find it impossible to communicate with each other properly across languages. Another is the long shadow of

Aristotelian binarism: categories (such as “translatable”) are discrete: things are either absolutely translatable or not, and therefore mostly not. Yet another has been the idea promoted by ecclesiastical authorities of more than one religion that the divine Word should not be tampered with, not translated into vernacular languages, or not translated at all. And such views of course link up with attitudes of cultural isolationism; the fear of the Other; the belief that the world is composed of unconnected and impermeable billiard balls; the denial of the Oneness and inter-relatedness of everything.

The diametrically opposing view is expressed e.g. by Benjamin ([1923] 1963: 185): languages share a kinship that is marked by a convergence, so that “[l]anguages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express”, as Zohn’s translation puts it (Schulte and Biguenet 1992: 74).

An opposing view is also crystallized in Katz’s (1978) Effability Principle, according to which any proposition can be expressed by some sentence in any language (although this principle is thus explicitly restricted to propositional meaning). Keenan (1978) rejects Katz’s principle, and thus agrees with the untranslatability thesis at least in its weak form: nothing is translatable *exactly*. Keenan argues that this is because human languages are by their very nature “imprecise”, fuzzy: they have to be, in order that we can talk about unlimited phenomena, in unlimited situations, to unlimited numbers of addressees, and so on. The built-in vagueness of language is thus functional: if languages were well-defined systems like mathematics, we would be less efficient communicators.

From the linguistic angle, the untranslatability idea looks like a restriction of language to *langue* only, to language as system; it seems to deny the role played by *parole*, by what people can do in their actual use of language. Translation is, after all, a form of language use; and from this point of view nothing is untranslatable: that is, everything can be translated somehow, to some extent, in some way – even puns can be explained. No communication is perfect, so why should translation be? Semiotically speaking, we could say that communication succeeds to the extent that the message decoded and interpreted by the receiver overlaps in some relevant way with that sent by the sender. Whereas the equivalence supermeme focuses on the overlap, the untranslatability supermeme focuses on the non-overlapping part of the message: each supermeme then assumes that the part it sees is actually the whole picture.

Moreover, it seems particularly shortsighted to maintain a belief in untranslatability in the face of the actual fact of translation. Looked at empirically, however, certain texts do tend to be more easily translated than others. Texts tend to be easier to translate when source and target cultures are in close cultural contact or share a similar cultural history, when source and target languages are related,

when the source text is already oriented towards the target readership (tourist brochures...), etc. (See e.g. Toury 1980:24–25, summarizing previous work by Even-Zohar.)

1.2.4 Free-vs-literal

Given that translation is nevertheless done, despite the impossibility of perfect equivalence, the terms in which it has been discussed have long been dominated by a single supermeme: the binary opposition between free and literal translation. Occasionally attempts are made to introduce a third term (e.g. Dryden [1680] 1975), but the overall polarity has long remained between these two extremes.

“Literal” is an unfortunate term: for some it means “word-for-word and therefore ungrammatical, like a linguist’s gloss”; for others it means “the closest possible grammatical translation, probably not sounding very natural”. In both cases, the stress is on closeness to the original form.

A neat view of the relation between literal and free is given by Barkhudarov (1993). He correlates the literal/free parameter with the translator’s choice of unit of translation: the smaller the unit of translation, the more literal the result, and the larger the unit, the freer the result (where the units are morpheme, word, phrase, clause, sentence). The appropriate unit of translation depends (among other things) on the kind of text: a translation that is “too literal” is based on too small units, and one that is “too free” on too large units.

In the modern age, at the literal extreme we find Nabokov’s equation of literalness and absolute accuracy ([1955] 1992:141), at least as regards literary translation:

The person who desires to turn a literary masterpiece into another language, has only one duty to perform, and this is to reproduce with absolute exactitude the whole text, and nothing but the text. The term “literal translation” is tautological since anything but that is not truly a translation but an imitation, an adaptation or a parody. ([1955] 1992:134)

In close agreement, and not only for literary texts, is Newmark’s claim that literal translation should always be preferred where it is possible: “provided that equivalent-effect is secured, the literal word-for-word translation is not only the best, it is the only valid method of translation” (1981:39).

An example of the other extreme is Robinson (1991), who argues that translators have the right to translate just how they feel, exploiting a wide range of relations between source and target. Indeed, he writes that ultimately the only valid criterion for a translation is that source and target text should “stand in some kind

of recognizable relation to each other” (153). This is a long way from the traditional equivalence requirement, some kind of “sameness”.

The dominance of this supermeme is indeed closely bound up with notions of equivalence. An advocacy of literal translation goes hand in hand with an adherence to formal equivalence, while free translation tends to prioritize functional equivalence. The required degree of literalness or freedom depends partly on the text-type etc.

The disadvantage of this supermeme is that it takes one particular type of translation – literal translation – and sets it up as one end of a single dimension. This rather prejudices the whole issue, and prevents us from looking at other dimensions.

1.2.5 All-writing-is-translating

Semiotically speaking, all writing, including translating, is the mapping of signifieds onto signifiers: we put meaning into words (cf. Jakobson 1959). This supermeme thus stresses not the impossibility of translation but its possibility, its familiarity. Translating is no more than a form of writing that happens to be re-writing. Learning to speak means learning to translate meanings into words (cf. Paz 1971). Furthermore, translation is also like the comprehension of everyday speech, as Schleiermacher ([1813] 1963: 38) points out: we often have to rephrase another person’s words in our own minds, in order to understand.

It is frequently said that we also translate across time within the same language, as when we read Chaucer in a modern English translation. And even without such a translation, when reading Chaucer in the original we are still somehow interpreting him into our own language. This hermeneutic view of translation has been stressed e.g. by G. Steiner (1975) and Paepcke (1986).

The idea that all writing is translating also emerges strongly in postmodern approaches to intertextuality, from Benjamin to Derrida and beyond: the basic argument here is that no texts are original, they are all derivative from other texts, parasitical upon them; writers do not create their own texts but borrow and combine elements from others, linking up in the global textual web. Our words are not ours: they have been used before, and our own use is inevitably tainted by their previous usage, in other people’s mouths. There are no “originals”; all we *can* do is translate. (For a discussion, see Gentzler 1993, especially Chapter 6.)

Associated with this idea is a particular attitude to meaning. Whereas the equivalence supermeme would assume that meanings are somewhere “out there”, already existing in objective reality, this supermeme would oppose such a notion. Instead, it takes the view that meaning is something that is negotiated during the

communication or interpretation process itself, it grows out of this process and is shaped by it, in the same way as it has been shaped by all previous communication. It is not “given-for-all-time” but “made”, both historically and instantaneously. Where the former supermeme stresses accuracy, therefore (in the sense of conforming to an objective “truth”), this supermeme would stress appropriateness (that is, appropriateness to a particular communicative situation). Against both these homogenizing notions of meaning, however, it is easy to argue that some meanings are more objective and stable than others, and that the relative priorities of accuracy and appropriateness are contingent on many conditions.

The all-writing-is-translating supermeme thus stands in opposition to the untranslatability one: it represents the belief that not only is translation possible but that it is in principle not so very different from other kinds of language use. Technically speaking, this is a mutualist supermeme, benefiting both itself and the host organism.

1.3 The locus of memes

Where do memes exist? To answer this question I turn to the philosophy of Karl Popper. Let us look first at his concept of the three Worlds.

This has been one of Popper’s most influential contributions to the philosophy of science (see especially Popper 1972: 106f.). World 1 consists of physical objects, such as chairs, trees, spiders. World 2 is the subjective world of states of consciousness, mental states, “behavioural dispositions to act” (106). And World 3 is “the world of *objective contents of thought*, especially of scientific and poetic thoughts and of works of art” (106; italics original). World 3 is the world of ideas, not as they exist in an individual’s mind (World 2) but as they exist in the public domain, in books, libraries, databases; as they exist “objectively”. World 3 contains theories, problems, hypotheses, arguments. A book, as a physical object, exists in World 1, but a book’s contents exist in World 3: a book can be burned, but its *contents* are not thus destroyed.

Popper’s three worlds obviously interact with each other. A theory starts life in World 2, in someone’s head; when expressed in words or figures it enters World 3, and a book containing it can prop open a door in World 1. As physical objects, spider’s webs exist in World 1, but such webs are produced by the innate “behavioural disposition to act” in the spider’s World 2, and our shared *idea* of such webs exists in World 3. World 2 phenomena obviously affect World 1 objects, and vice versa. More interestingly, World 3 also interacts with both the other worlds. World 3 phenomena are, first of all, the products of the interaction between Worlds 1 and 2; but – and this is the main point at issue here – World 3

phenomena also affect World 2 (and thereby World 1). Ideas, for instance, affect the way we think and behave. Theories can affect the way we view the world and act within and upon it.

The way World 3 impinges upon Worlds 1 and 2 is not deterministic, however. Because the interaction between the three worlds is in constant flux, feedback from one world to another is inherent. Because of the existence of this flexible feedback and the constant adjustments it gives rise to, Popper needs a concept of influence or control which is somewhere between full determinism and complete randomness. He calls this non-deterministic control, exercised in particular by World 3 over World 2, *plastic control* (e.g. 1972:239f.). Critical arguments are a means of plastic control over behaviour; our theories exert a plastic control over ourselves.

In Popper's own words:

[T]he control of ourselves and of our actions by our theories is a *plastic* control. We are not *forced* to submit ourselves to the control of our theories, for we can discuss them critically, and we can reject them freely if we think they fall short of our regulative standards. So the control is far from one-sided. Not only do our theories control us, but we can control our theories (and even our standards): there is a kind of *feed-back* here. (1972: 240–241; italics original)

So in which of these Worlds do we find memes? The answer is: in all three. As unexpressed thoughts, memes exist in World 2. But they presumably also exist in World 1, as neural patterns of synapses in the brain. A biologist puts it this way:

Any cultural trait that is taken over by a given individual from another individual must accordingly be thought of as the transfer of a particular pattern of synaptic hotspots within the associative networks of one brain to the associative networks of another brain. (Delius 1989: 44)

Elsewhere in the article from which the above quotation comes, Delius glosses memes as “constellations of activated and non-activated synapses within neural memory networks” (45), and talks about them competing “for synaptic space” (67). Tantalizingly, such ideas also seem compatible with Edelman's theory of neuronal group selection (see Edelman 1992): the human brain appears to be even more astonishing than one might think.

Most interestingly and relevantly for our purposes, however, memes also exist in World 3. Indeed, as ideas, theories, arguments and the like, memes are very typical inhabitants of World 3. As such, they of course affect our Worlds 1 and 2, so that the survival of the inhabitants of World 1 (such as ourselves) depends to some extent on what memes prevail in World 3 and on the nature of the influence (plastic control) they have.