

# Translation as Critique of “Cultural Sameness”: Ricoeur, Luther and the Practice of Translation

## Introduction<sup>[1]</sup>

This article discusses translation as a critique of what I call “cultural sameness”. “Cultural sameness” is a rephrasing of the Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad’s concept “imagined sameness” (Gullestad 2002, 2004). With this notion she wants to show how the process of inclusion (and exclusion) of new citizens into Norwegian society depends not only on receiving formal status as an equal citizen, but also how inclusion is linked to a social and anthropological dimension: in order to be regarded as an equal, the same cultural background and origin is required. In the text I interpret this “imagined sameness” as referring to *cultural* sameness. We imagine that the others we recognize as our equals have the same cultural background as ourselves and that we are recognized by others culturally identical or similar to ourselves. It is the constellation of sameness and culture that I want to question in this text.

Sameness as a logical category (to be the same or being identical) is perceived as binary and defined by its opposite: difference. The problem with sameness is that it is oppositional, and hence closed, and that culture together with sameness here constitutes a kind of vicious circle: those who are included belong to the same culture, and those who are excluded belong to a different one. My claim is that the reason why culture has a part in exclusion and inclusion is due to its being linked to the idea of sameness and it is this very sameness that should be questioned.

How can we go about it? How can we challenge the binary logic of sameness and difference? I propose a reflection on the theory and practice of translation as analogous to thinking of culture in a way that does not work on the assumption of binary sameness and difference. As a guide for these reflections I select the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur and his book *On translation* (Ricoeur 2004b). As a well demonstrated historical case I will also draw on Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible into German during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Luther’s translation showed that it was possible for the meaning of the original text in Hebrew and Greek to be understood in the German language. As regards my guide, I wish to emphasise two points regarding Ricoeur’s philosophy of translation.

First of all by taking Ricoeur’s understanding of translation I want to show that the problem of understanding culture as static, pure and different is analogous to how languages are thought of as untranslatable (focusing on difference) or translatable (focusing on sameness).

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A second aspect of translation is the consequence of the first point. If cohabitation in a society depends on cultural sameness or shared cultural identity, then this must mean that there is an inside and an outside to this culture that make it possible to distinguish those who belong here and those who do not. Translation gives us an alternative way of imagining this. Like translations, following Ricoeur, *create comparables* between languages, comparables between cultures can be created too. My claim is thus that we do not have to have the same cultural background in order to be able to live together. Translation through its practices thus articulates how equality and difference can be possible at the same time. Thus the link between equality and sameness is not unbreakable.

### **The problem of “cultural sameness”: closure and exclusion**

The complex aim of this text is to discuss translation in relation to a certain notion of culture and the role that culture plays in inclusion and exclusion of new citizens. So, first of all, what does this notion of culture distinguish and what role does it play in inclusion and exclusion?

Central to my argument is what Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad suggested in two of her articles, where she discussed how “culture” has replaced “race” as a means for excluding and including New Norwegian citizens. She claimed that it is not sufficient to acquire formal legal status as a citizen in order to be recognized as an equal citizens; this new citizen also has to feel that she is “the same” as those whose recognition is sought. Referring to Alexis de Tocqueville, Gullestad wrote that: “people have to feel that they are more or less the same in order to be equal of value” (Gullestad 2002, p. 46).

This feeling is analogous to the “imagined” and refers to the historian Benedict Andersons’ ground-breaking study of nationalism, *Imagined communities* (Anderson 2006). Anderson included imagination as an analytical concept for rendering account of the possibility that a huge amount of people who have never met and are geographically spread across an enormous territory to share a feeling of belonging together: the feeling of a national community could thus be said to be imagined<sup>[2]</sup>.

The link that Gullestad creates between the constitutional equality of all Norwegian citizens and the socially and anthropologically constituted value of equality makes sense since it

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explains the inconsistencies often found in debates on Norwegian culture. It is often said that immigrants, when becoming Norwegian citizens, “must adapt to our ways of living” and abandon their cultural features and customs when those are conflicting with the norms inherent in Norwegian culture. But there seems to be confusion as to how they should do this and about what they should adapt to. When discussing Norwegian culture, the debate tends to fluctuate between references to language, values, cultural traditions, religious background (Andersen/ Tybring-Gjedde 2010) on the one hand, and the legal and political fundamentals of society such as democracy, rule of law and the freedom of speech on the other (NRK 2009, debate on Norwegian values). Whereas the essence of what is Norwegian is vague, the legal and political fundamentals are not particularly Norwegian. However, Gullestad’s analysis explains, as far as I see it, why there is no mix up after all: the imagined sameness constitutes the community and consequently the execution of equality in the social world. In order to be recognized as equal one must be the same (identical and/or similar) as those recognizing you. From this perspective, it seems impossible to adapt to the Norwegian society, even if one minutely follows the decrees and requirements of political and legal institutions, simply because the cultural background of the immigrant is different.

Gullestad expands the idea of “imagined community” into what she calls “imagined sameness”: we imagine that everyone who belongs to a national community is the same as ourselves<sup>[3]</sup>. In fact, it is the hallmark of a specific Nordic imagination, that “social actors must consider themselves as more or less the same” (Gullestad 2002, p. 46). It is not sufficient to render any account of Norwegian egalitarianism by referring to Norway’s formal constitutional framework. Her aim is to articulate the social and anthropological dimension that constitutes egalitarianism as a value. She continues by saying that:

When they [the social actors] thus manage to establish a definition of the situation focusing on sameness, each of the parties – paradoxically – also gains confirmation of their individual value. In order to have their desired identities confirmed, people need relevant others who are able and willing to recognize and support them. According to the logic involved, the relevant supporters are other people who are regarded as similar. This logic often leads to an interaction style in which commonalities are emphasized, while differences are played down. In this way the sameness cannot always be observed but is, rather, a style that focuses on sameness. For the sake of simplicity I call it “imagined sameness” (Ibid, p. 47).

What I find interesting here is what she says about commonalities being emphasized. The commonalities she has in mind are culture, origin and ancestry. I hence find it pertinent to interpret or rephrase Gullestad’s term “imagined sameness” as a “cultural sameness”,

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meaning that what is imagined as common, or that which makes us the same, is the culture one belongs to.

Going back to Gullestad, she utilizes Anderson’s reflections on the function of the imagination to shed some light on mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion and the establishment of hierarchy. Her point is, as far as I understand it, that even though egalitarianism is supposed to account for everyone, we do not leave the idea of cultural belonging when it comes to the recognition of who is a genuinely equal citizen. We thus enter the play of exclusion and inclusion. Even though equality is supposed to be universal and individual, equality is nevertheless linked to a common culture, ancestry and origin. And this “culture” is somehow regarded as completed” (2002, p. 53). Therefore, it is not too farfetched to interpret Gullestad’s imagined sameness as a cultural sameness, which refers to cultural identity and cultural origin. For an immigrant, or rather through the very label of being called an “immigrant”, this renders the inclusion into a society a difficult task. An immigrant is someone whose cultural identity and origin is always different and which will never cease to stick with this person. The immigrant is, almost by receiving this nametag alone, excluded from the community of genuine Norwegians and placed within an invisible hierarchy of Norwegians. This exclusion and hierarchy is possible to establish on the basis of an assumption that there is a cultural difference between the original and ethnic Norwegians and those entering the community.

We are now approaching the problem that I want to look into and which connects “cultural sameness” and translation. The logic, which makes it possible to reproduce the interface between inclusion and exclusion or the tension between equality and hierarchy, is connected to “sameness”. Or rather, “sameness” is, logically speaking, an oppositional notion that has difference as its counterpart: that which is not the same, is different. In The Oxford English Dictionary we can read the following about the definition of identity: “the sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else” (cited in Gleason 1983). “Sameness” appears synonymously with “identity” and is defined through “not being something else”. Since sameness and difference represent oppositional notions, they exclude each other. In fact the only way they can be related is by mutually excluding each other. The point is that this logic is found on a practical and social level too, in the sense that those who have a different cultural background and attachment are excluded. And when applied to “culture” this renders culture something closed. It resembles a vicious circle: the imagined sameness shapes our understanding of culture, which in its turn reproduces exclusion and inclusion, and this exclusion and inclusion affirms the imagined sameness. The question is then whether it is possible to break the circle. Is it possible to articulate openness of culture? And if so, how

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should we articulate it?

By drawing a parallel between culture and language, I wish to show how translation as a problematization of the closing of languages might teach us something about the closing of culture. As far as I am concerned, the obstacle in seeing culture as closed is parallel, if not identical, to the problem of untranslatability and lack of communicative ability between languages. Common for them both is that sameness and difference constitute closure. At the social level this closure is reproducing exclusion, whereas in the field of language what is being reproduced tends to be the view that communication is impossible. However, in order to comprehend this parallel, we must turn our attention more fully to translation.

### **What is translation?**

Translation comes from Classical Latin *translatus*. *Trans* means “across” and *latus* is the perfect passive participle of the verb *fero, ferre*, which means “to bear”. To translate is to lead, bring, transport or conduct across and over to something.

In the practice of translation we find both the aspect of carrying something across and then of interpreting it. This practice could be described as the tension between two poles: source language and target language. The French translation scholar Jean-René Ladmiral writes that: “Translation passes a message from the language of departure or source language to the language of arrival or target language.” (Ladmiral 1994, p. 11; translation by the author) The translation transmits both meaning and message from one place to another. The point of departure is thus something incomprehensible that requires that we carry it over to our side for interpretation. It could perhaps be illustrated by the image of two separate river banks. Transporting something from one side to the other is thus perturbed until something, for instance, a bridge, is constructed, which may be able to carry things across. The two banks are no longer separated. However, the river is still there and the bridge might be fragile: a bad translation might turn out to be ruinous, leading to new misunderstandings. Briefly put, a translation might potentially always be replaced by a better one.

Relevant historical examples of translation are not difficult to find. During the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the contact between the West and the Arabic world led to vital developments, as the Greek source and foundation of the West were rediscovered. For instance, major works by Hippocrates, Galen and Aristotle were translated by Wilhem of Moerbekes (Störig 1963, p. xi).

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However, despite a widespread *practice* of translation, there were no *theoretical studies* of translations until much later. Even though a scientific approach to translation emerged in the 15<sup>th</sup> century with Leonardo Bruni's work *De Interpretatione Recta* (1420), a theoretical approach to translation was first and foremost developed from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Ricoeur refers in many places to the work of Antoine Berman and his book *L'épreuve de l'étranger*, where Berman discusses two German traditions of translation. On the one hand we have the likes of Novalis and Schlegel, who subscribed to what Berman called a speculative theory of translation, which was furthermore linked to what they conceived of as critique. Berman writes that for the romantic thinkers' translation was a way of improving the potential in the original. This led for instance to the conclusion that Shakespeare was better in German than in the original English:

The original itself...possesses an a priori aim: The idea of the work, that the work wants to be (l'Idée de l'Oeuvre que l'oeuvre veut être), tends to be...but which it empirically speaking never is. The original, in this sense, is nothing but the copy- the translation if you like- of this a priori figure...By this aim the translation produces a “better” text than the first (Berman, p. 172).

On the other hand we have among others Humboldt and Schleiermacher, who for the first time tries to conceive of that which is alien or strange in a text. Following Berman's account what is different for them compared to Novalis and Schlegel is that understanding is introduced as a problem. To understand a text is to understand “an expressive product of a subject” (Ibid, p. 227) and the phenomenon of objective language defined by history and culture. And this conception of history and culture is different from those of the readers, interpreters or translators. (Ibid) Thirdly, language is not just an instrument, but the place where the human being lives. Language defines who a human being is and renders expression through language essential. Through these three points one becomes aware of the difference between languages and the importance of these differences. A text is the expression of an individual author who expresses him- or her-self in the language of a specific time and place. Without taking this specific time and place into account, the vital aspect of the expression is lost.

Schleiermacher in particular is enormously interesting in his linking of understanding, interpretation and translation. Whereas interpretation concerns itself with ordinary expressions, translation handles science and art. But how should this relation between the authors and the reader's language be balanced by the translator? It is here that Schleiermacher refutes the idea that one should translate as if the author wrote in the

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language of the reader (Ibid, p. 235). The most important issue to recognize for a translator is the writer’s relation to his or her mother tongue. Schleiermacher argues that in order to recognize one’s own mother tongue and having one’s own mother tongue recognized, one must be able to receive what is different. As far as I understand it, this means that what is strange and different has a constitutive role for the status of equality. Berman once wrote that Schleiermacher linked translation to a cultural situation where the national language has not yet affirmed itself, and thus could not receive the other languages nor present itself as a cultivated language (Ibid, p. 236).

Thus we may see that translation has a role to play in the inter-subjective constitution of languages. By approaching the reader’s language to the author, translations can demonstrate the equal value of the author’s language. What is first and foremost interesting for our part is the role of what is foreign (*l’épreuve de l’étranger*) here. It is only by showing that the reader’s mother tongue is as rich as the author’s that it can receive a status as equal. And this equality between languages is, as we shall see, pivotal for understanding Luther’s translation, which I will discuss later.

Why take this brief historical tour through the theme of translation? Schleiermacher’s sensitivity for those elements and words which are foreign represents a central event in the philosophy of translation. Translation should be seen as an effort to understand what is foreign and thus remains a challenge for the translator. Is it possible to bring a foreign meaning or message over into your own language without losing the original meaning? On the other hand, how far should we go in making the foreign into the absolute? Are translations impossible due to the differences between languages, or are they possible because we are all of the same nature or with the same historical origin? We will now go on scrutinizing the translator’s attempt to balance two languages in order that we may articulate a thinking that does not see sameness and difference as the only alternatives.

### **Translation from theory to practice**

If we now turn more specifically to Paul Ricoeur’s notion of translation, the basis for our reflections is a collection of three articles on translation published under the title *Sur la traduction* (Ricoeur 2004a). I shall not give a summary of the texts here, but rather refer to those parts which are central to our problem.

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Translation fluctuates between the language of the author and the language of the reader. Ricoeur refers to a long tradition in the theory of translation. Franz Rosenzweig presents translation as a paradox. It serves two masters: the author in her work and the readers' desire to understand. Schleiermacher for his part describes, as we have seen, translation as taking the author to the reader and the reader to the author. According to him, a translator has to choose in the end between the language of the author and the language of the reader. And in the end it is the translator's ability to let the reader's language receive the author's language that is the test of whether or not the reader's language is equal to the author's. (Berman, pp. 226-250) Ladmiral in his book *Traduire: théorèmes pour la traduction* denominates the antinomy in translation between the literal and the literary (Ladmiral 1994, p. 89).

Now, the tension between these two poles – the author and the reader – has led to both a linguistic and a philological debate, as well as to speculation on whether or not translation is in fact possible. Two kinds or types of response can be discerned. On the one hand, given the diversity of languages, the differences between languages make translation impossible. And, as Ladmiral points out, this seems to be a dominant position. (Ibid, p. 85) In lack of a third text, the transition between the two languages remains blocked. On the other hand, given that translations actually take place, different languages must be sharing some common ground. This is an attempt to justify translations based on either common origin prior to the separation of all languages, or in a prior deeper or implicit structure common to all languages. However both strands meet obstacles: the former cannot explain the fact that translations take place; the latter does not succeed in supplying us with this common ground.

Ricoeur's contribution is not a solution to these problems. His point is rather that this problem, *whether or not* translation is possible, is a theoretical problem imposed from the outside. He tries to understand the problem that *the practice* of translation is a response to. And what is this problem? According to Ricoeur, the real problem in the practice of translation is whether to be faithful to or to betray the language of the reader and whether to be faithful or to betray the language of the author. The outcome of this tension is “the production of equivalence without identity”. (Ricoeur 2004a: 63) Since the tension between fidelity and treason is never dissolved, it rather accounts for how an equivalent is not identical. Even though Ricoeur to a certain point might be right, the question is whether this displacement from theory to practice really avoids the problem about whether or not translation is possible. As Ladmiral points out, the question about whether translation is possible is posed exactly due to this problem – which language to be faithful to – in the practice. They are part of the same antinomy. Thus it appears difficult to get rid of the question concerning whether translation is possible, due to the fact that every translation is faced with the question of



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whether it is a good translation. On the other hand, the question is then of quality and not of possibility. To say that a translation is not sufficient is not to say that translation as such is impossible. And in a translation some parts might be deemed more successful than others. That does not mean that less successful translations prove the impossibility of translating, only that the demand of faithfulness to the two languages has been difficult to comply with.

This problem still endures after the translator’s work itself is finished. Even though there is no third text from where one can judge a translation, it does not follow that the translation is exempt from criticism. And the best way to criticize a translation is to present a better one. Critique is perhaps too vague or general to constitute a principle in translations, but is however a necessary part of the translator’s onerous task.

### **Between fidelity and treason: Luther’s creation of the comparable**

Translation is the construction of equivalence without identity or a comparable between two languages. This implies a continuity and rupture of meaning at the same time. Where continuity is ensured in the commitment or faithfulness to both the author and the reader, the ruptures reveal themselves in the betrayal of them. The fidelity of received language is jeopardised in favour of a creative act, which at the same time is, as Ricoeur writes, a risk: “Grandeur of translation, risk of translation: creative betrayal of the original, equally creative appropriation by the language of reception or; construction of the comparable.” (Ricoeur 2004b: 37)

What then is a comparable? An example that is close to Ricoeur’s heart is Martin Luther’s translation of the Greek Bible into German in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Translations of the Bible had been undertaken before, both into German as well as into other languages, but Luther gave the first complete translation of the Greek and Hebrew texts into German without going through Latin. Luther also found the earlier German translations of parts of the Bible too Latin, whereas he aimed at a Germanization of the Bible. We are not forgetting the Geneva Bible or the Czech translation by the Moravian church, even though that is not our focus here. Before Luther, the translation of the Greek text had been done through Latin. The Catholic Church had had a monopoly regarding translation and interpretation of the Bible through the Latin language, which only the Church was the real possessor of. If we read Luther’s own thoughts on Biblical translation in *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*, we can discern his antiauthoritarian statement that:

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We do not have to ask the literal Latin how we are to speak German... Rather we must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, by the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. Then they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them. (Luther 2003; translation by Gary Mann)

Reading this, it is striking to note the central role that translation has in Luther’s reformation. As Luther’s credo was that the Bible is the only authority (*sola scriptura*), he opened the way for a thinking that did not have to go through the tradition of the Catholic Church. In order to realise this idea that the Bible is the only authority, a consequence is that everyone must be able to read it. *Sola scriptura* is no good without people being able to read the Bible. Luther’s solution is ingenious. Instead of everyone learning the only accepted language of translation, Latin, which up until then had only been reserved for a few, the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek texts became accessible in the language of the people. In other words, Luther’s translation is not merely the effect of the idea of the reformation; it could be understood as its articulation and realisation. Or differently put, would *sola scriptura* be equally meaningful without the translation of the Bible? The translation thus expresses the reformation on a concrete and symbolic level. The real effect was however not only a change in the religious perception, but the destabilisation of the Church’s power and hegemony. This power was partly constituted by the Latin language as the language through which one had access to God’s word and hence the truth. The truth of God’s word constituted this power. The implication of translating the Bible to other languages than Latin was that truth was no longer mediated by the Church.

Luther wanted to Germanize the Bible by translating it into good German, the German of the people. However it was not clear what good German meant, as the Germans spoke a number of dialects (*Mundarten*). Antoine Berman (1995) describes the difficult balance. Luther’s double attempt was to:

Translate into a German which a priori was local, his own *Hochdeutsch* German, but in this process of translating, elevate this local German into a common German (un allemand commun), a *lingua franca*. In order for this German not to become a language detached from the people, it had to conserve something of the *Mundarten* and the general modes of expressions from popular language (Berman, p. 46; translation by the author).

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In order for the German particularity to acquire universality in the sense of equality with Latin, it could not remain in the “pure” particularity of the dialects. However, without some continuity to the dialects and the *Mundarten*, it would become too strong a homogenization.

Even though Luther was convinced that God’s word could be received in the German language, he was not exempt from the paradoxical demand in every translation of serving two masters: the language of the original or the language of the reader. Even though the principle of taking the original to the reader’s language is the most common for all translations, Luther finds it also necessary to practice the other principle of taking the reader to the language of origin. As Franz Rosenzweig writes in his text “Die Schrift und Luther” (Rosenzweig 1963), Luther was conscious of the necessity to give room for the Hebrew language in order to fully appreciate the meaning of the text. It was thus sometimes necessary to go beyond the German normal language, as he explains in his foreword to the translation of the Psalms, and “get used to” such words (*solche Worte behalten, gewöhnen*). For example, in order to conserve the Hebrew meaning he substitutes *Gefangenden erlöset* (liberated the imprisoned) with *Gefängnis gefangen* (imprisoned the prison/imprisonment) as an expression of what Christ has done. The Hebrew meaning, that expresses that Christ has imprisoned the prison itself, could thus be said to hold an even stronger meaning than just claiming that he has liberated the imprisoned. Now, what is interesting here is that Luther does not import a foreign word to express this, but twists the German language itself so that it can receive the proper meaning of the original. It is still German, but Luther found (in *Gefängnis gefangen*) either a potential not yet brought to the fore in the German language, or he actually constructed a neologism in German.

The idea of the universal as the word, reason or right in European history is accompanied by a notion of its linguistic form (Latin, French). Latin could thus be opposed by particular languages, or rather languages which had only an oral usage on the one hand, and languages that had writing and grammar on the other. This notion of the universal as the opposite to the particular is however something that found its way into the age of the Enlightenment. But, as Richard Kearney points out, there were obstacles:

The ideal in the century of Enlightenment of a universal perfect language was confronted with the resistance from cultural differences that rested on linguistic disparity... most attempts at founding a language one and absolute was found to be, de facto, an imperialist and cunning manoeuvre... which aimed at giving privilege to one particular language...in relation to the languages of subordinate countries or regions. (Kearney, p. 163)

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According to Annelise Senger, Luther viewed translation as reviving old German words rather than importing foreign elements. In this respect Luther actually did contribute to homogenize the German language as later will become clear. As Luther states elsewhere in *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*, the most important element to be conserved from the original text is its implied meaning.

For our part, the most interesting aspect of Luther’s translation is how German becomes a language that the “original” text could be translated into. How can this balance, that Berman describes as “neither Latin nor a pure dialect, but a popular use of language”, be articulated? German was up until then incomparable to Latin and thus inept as translation-language. In other words, German was not an equivalent to Latin when it came to receiving the word of God. God did not speak German until Luther translated the Bible. Luther thus changed the perception of the German language. Ricoeur writes that:

Luther not only constructed a comparable in translating the Bible into German, in “germanizing” it, as he dared say, in the face of St. Jerome’s Latin, but created the German language, as comparable to Latin, to the Greek of the Septuagint, and to the Hebrew of the Bible. (Ricoeur 2004b: 37)

Once again, Luther’s translation had a striking significance for the philosophy of the Enlightenment a century later. First of all, the Church was dethroned as exclusive authority. However, that did not imply a rejection of the universal as such. Without claiming that Luther was an Enlightenment thinker-, one could perhaps localize Luther’s enterprise as being somewhere between what later became the French and the German versions of Enlightenment. The former is focused on dethroning all authorities with reference to metaphysics, tradition etc., but nevertheless preserves a centralist and anti-traditional universalism. The latter is represented by, for instance, Herder, who criticizes the rationalism of the authors of the *Encyclopédie*. On Herder’s stance, Louis Dumont writes in *Essais sur l’individualisme* that he criticized: “The enlightenment for their vulgar rationalism, their narrow understanding of progress, and above all the hegemony of this universalist rationalism” (Dumont 1983, p. 137; translation by the author). Despite Luther’s and Herder’s diverging views on translation, Luther initiated a criticism of the universalism on which Herder continues. Having said that, Luther’s enterprise is not a refutation of the universal in general, as Dumont proposes in the case of Herder. Even though Luther’s perspective was to prove the Church wrong, and not to promote any kind of modern plurality, rendering the word of God accessible for everyone in their own language, set ideas in motion that led to a

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later destabilisation of the notion of the universal. In translation it is possible to grasp the universal in the particular.

Returning to the dilemma of treason and fidelity, what status does this *conversion of signs* have? Since there is no third text or criterion by which one can measure the correctness of a translation, one is left with the dilemma of treason and fidelity. And as Olivier Abel and Jerome Porée write, not even a true fidelity is an identical replica. However, they write as well: “that does not mean that translation is treason... it is a creative fidelity. “ (Abel/Porée, p. 125) They seem to indicate an opposition between treason and fidelity that creativity tries to surmount. This seems a bit odd, particularly in the light of Ricoeur’s own description of the grandeur of translation as “creative betrayal of the original“. However one chooses to see it, what seems to be at the center of the dilemma between fidelity and treason is creativity. Creativity is necessary in order to make the reader’s language able to receive the foreign language. On the other hand “too much” creativity risk losing the faithfulness to both languages. Thus the translator has to decide how “much” creativity and which of the two languages one has to be most faithful to.

We are now in a better position to understand the initial precisions on the comparable. Theoretically speaking, the construction of a comparable means three things: the comparable unites two entities that before were separated or heterogeneous; in this case the German written language unites the spoken German as well as the original texts in Greek and Hebrew. Secondly, in this process, the German language thought of as inferior is lifted up to equal Latin, Greek and Hebrew. And, thirdly, this equality is achieved without abandoning the German language tradition.

Going back to Ricoeur’s displacement from theory to practice, the question is not whether it is possible to translate the Bible, but to what degree the translation betrays or remains faithful to the original language and the language of the reader. Luther created what we can call an equivalent without adequacy or identity, or in other words an equivalent without homogeneity. Luther emphasizes a connective aspect when German as a language can only become a language of its own after or through its connection to planetary meanings or universals like the Bible. By finding equivalence between the Hebrew and Greek languages and the German dialects, German could be recognized as a particular language. But if this is possible, then it opens up the question of how that may be possible. Is there some common ground historically or in human nature which makes it possible? On the other hand, the failure to find the perfect translation might lead us to the opposite conclusion, i.e. that it is impossible. In other words, we see here a parallel between the problems in translation and those of culture, that is the transition between outside and inside and the question of how these two could somehow be joined. The practice of translation seems to assume and

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question the inside and outside of language at the same time. It assumes both unity and diversity of language. Translation is both a success (when presenting a translation) and a failure (at finding a perfect translation). These are the paradoxes of translation.

### **From language to culture and back: the parallel**

How is Luther’s creation of a comparable relevant to the question of cultural sameness? As Ricoeur shows, translation does not work on such epistemological assumptions. Languages are either too different or have the same origin, but in both cases they pursue their own epistemological questions. The epistemology of translation may rather be found in practice. Or as Ricoeur writes, paraphrasing Donald Davidson, that translation is: “Theoretically Difficult, Hard and Practically Simple, Easy.” (Ricoeur 2004b, p. 15) Having said that, practices never articulate themselves but must be explicated.

What I first of all find interesting is Ricoeur’s take on this. Like the creation of a comparable shows that the problem “*whether* translation is possible or not” is a false or merely theoretical problem, this helps us to ask if the analogous problem “*whether* it is possible to live together in a culturally diverse society or not” is a false or merely theoretical problem too. What the hypothetical question does not take into account is the case where the problem has already been overcome. But since Ricoeur has analysed this through Luther’s practical enterprise, he has also found that this is not the question that translation responds to at all. The question is rather the degree of faithfulness or betrayal to one of the two languages. As far as I can see, this represents an insightful approach that is transferable to the question of culture. A process of integration is perhaps rather a question of how faithful or how deceitful one could be.

Homogeneity in the sense of *demand for adaptation* is thus a response to a false problem. The demand for adaptation is a response to a problem that assumes that other cultures represent a threat to democracy as well as to society as a whole, whether Norwegian or French, etc. I am not making an invitation to relativism or a refutation of values, norms and principles in our societies. Nor am I presenting a naïve proposition. There are of course groups and individuals who have no interest in democracy and the rule of law, and there are those who are aiming at founding society on alternative laws. But in this context as elsewhere, there are only potentialities, and no guarantees.

My point is rather that this hypothetical question is nurturing itself on the logic of identity and difference that is common to both language and culture. The theory of translation puts the

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basic question of whether translation is at all possible or not. It premises the outcome on either an identity of all languages in human nature or a common origin, or on the differences between languages being insurmountable. This is a similar point to that of Gullestad when she reflects on the imagined sameness, which is a common cultural identity and origin. This sameness has as its opposite another and different cultural identity and origin. Following the egalitarian logic, and it being linked to this imagined sameness, any co-habitation is impossible because of a lack of original common origin that may ground a community. The hypothetical and the imagined have that in common: that they disregard practices that show something else than what theory allows. What Gullestad does not take into account is the practices or examples of successful integration, which could be subversive to the imagined sameness.

Going back to Luther and the epistemological problem that Luther wrestled with in his translations, he did not deal with the question of whether or not the translation was possible, but rather whether he could succeed in stabilising the tension between faithfulness and treason. Again, the problem is not theoretical but practical. Likewise, we must investigate multicultural society taking the practices that are already there in order to articulate that which is already possible in practice. The idea of a cultural sameness and the *demand for adaptation to our values* does not render us capable of understanding the intercultural practices, which are already there and transgress our imagination. In the way in which translation as a practice transgresses our imagination, we must look into transcultural and intercultural practices that also transgress our imagination.

Further, as a result of this preliminary “deconstruction” of the question comes the more constructive solution. In Luther’s case, the creation of a comparable makes languages (German and Greek) that before were separated or heterogeneous, open to each other. Thus, Luther’s practice of translation has not only showed us a false or badly put question. It has also given us more specifically a practical example, which can reflect on cultural diversity. Translation as a practical activity overcomes obstacles of understanding. The fact that people go from not understanding to understanding one another is understandable first of all from the practice of translation. The risk is of course that the translation becomes focused on adaptation.

In addition, the equal status of German and Latin is achieved without abandoning the German language and German tradition. If the point of Luther’s translation was the creation of an equivalent without identity, something comparable to Latin, this is important due to the fact that it was no longer an obligation to learn Latin to conceive of God’s word. German received the status of universal equality to Latin, but kept its German particularity. German as Biblical language was the construction of an equivalent to Latin without being identical to

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Latin. To say that German is equivalent or comparable to Latin is to say at once that German and Latin are of equal value, that it is possible to say the same in both languages, and that a premise is not a complete homogenisation.

This gives us another interesting take on the parallel between language and culture. As I see it, there are some analogous points between the Latin-German opposition and the sameness-otherness opposition in a multicultural society. What Luther’s translation created was an equality which is not based on sameness. Even though the German language is related to Latin, Greek or Hebrew, it is not reducible to them. Instead a specific German branch of Christianity saw the light of the day and augmented the linguistic and cultural spectre of the Christian religion. Equality meant thus creative contribution and recognition, but not on its own terms alone. Likewise, homogenisation, total adaptation, or cultural sameness are not a prerequisite for co-habitation and equality in a society. What generates a feeling of equality is rather that one with one’s own background can contribute to this co-habitation and perhaps broaden the imagination of what it means to be Norwegian, French, etc.

### **The paradigm of openness**

Ricoeur writes that translation is a paradigm and articulates a linguistic hospitality. This linguistic hospitality consists in the fact that the attempt to understand the foreign language is prior to the appropriation of it. Translation questions our self-centered being by living in a language other than our own and by welcoming a foreign language to be in our own. By calling it a “paradigm”, Ricoeur sees a parallel or analogy between languages, confessions, and religions. I would like not only to add culture to the list of analogues, but even say that translation is an intervention into the paradigm of linguistic comparison that constitutes the logic of cultural sameness and cultural difference. What Ricoeur means by calling it a paradigm is that it goes deeper and wider than this kind of comparison.

In the secondary literature on Ricoeur’s philosophy of translation, the concept of paradigm is mentioned many times. Richard Kearney writes about translation as a linguistic, ontological, anthropological and hermeneutic paradigm. Kearney writes: “Ricoeur is holding the view that good translations require a radical openness towards the other.”(Kearney, p. 161) And further: “the translation is exposing us to what is other (*l'étranger*). We are at the same time involved with an alterity residing outside ourselves (*en dehors du chez-soi*) and an alterity residing inside.”(Ibid, p. 164) This point of an alterity residing inside ourselves is a point



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underlined many times by Ricoeur and originally borrowed from Georg Steiner, who in his book *After Babel* (Steiner 1998) writes about translation internal to a cultural and linguistic domain. It seems as though we are confronted here with a question of openness. Ricoeur’s philosophy of translation is a philosophy of hospitality which points to an openness. And even though this could easily be interpreted as an ethical statement, does it not also equally hold as an epistemological statement about the practice of translation? This is not a relativist point of view. In order for a translation to be good both languages must be open: otherwise it is not a translation. Openness renders account for the rules governing the practice of translation: in order to translate one it is necessary to listen and learn what is foreign. Otherwise we are not translating.

### **Conclusion**

If we now take everything into consideration, we see that the “cultural sameness” that renders culture into a mechanism of exclusion and inclusion is situated within the binary logic of identity and difference. In order to be included into a society you have to be imagined to have the same cultural attachment. I have tried to challenge this notion by reflecting on an alternative to oppositional thinking: translation. The practice of translation follows a logic that is not oppositional but rather one of balances between languages and degrees of openness between them. In order to translate one must be open to another language, but without abandoning his or her own starting language. Luther’s translation showed that such openness was possible for the meaning of the Greek and Hebrew text to enter the German language and for these meanings to be articulated in new forms.

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[1] I want to thank Martin Peterson for comments on this text.

[2] I will not dwell on this here, but “imagined” is not the obverse of reality. Imagination is rather an element in the constitution of national communities, since the amount of people and the territory of the nation makes it impossible to ground community in, for instance, face-to-face relations.

[3] The Norwegian version of the article (Gullestad 2002) uses *likhet*, which also means “semblance” and “similarity”. And the author makes it clear that *likhet* covers both meanings in Norwegian. So there is an ambiguity in *likhet* meaning sameness (identical) and similarity at the same time. Having said that, she has chosen sameness and not similarity in the English version.

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