

## Embodied translation: Henri Meschonnic on translating for/through the ear and the mouth

**Douglas Robinson**

*Hongkong Baptist University*

---

### **Abstract**

Among translation scholars, Henri Meschonnic is best known as a radical theorist of translation, someone focused on the orality and general embodiedness of the poem, indeed someone who insisted that “we must invent discourse equivalences in the target language: prosody for prosody, metaphor for metaphor, pun for pun, rhythm for rhythm” (Boulanger, 2011, p. 71). What does that mean in practice? And what radical transformations does that practice mean for translation theory? This article does Meschonnic the honor of taking him seriously on mouthable orality, rhythm, and subjectivity by exploring the radical implications of his “wild” thinking.

### **Keywords**

Mouthable orality, translating rhythm for rhythm, hearing with the mouth, speaking with the ear

## 1. Orality, rhythm, subjectivity

Among translation scholars, Henri Meschonnic is best known as a radical theorist of translation, someone focused on the orality and general embodiedness of the poem, indeed someone who insisted that “we must invent discourse equivalences in the target language: prosody for prosody, metaphor for metaphor, pun for pun, rhythm for rhythm” (Boulanger, 2011, p. 71). As a translator Meschonnic (1970, 1981, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005) was primarily focused on the Hebrew Bible, the most authoritative text of which—the Masoretic—has the rhythmic accents marked in the text as performative indices, to guide its reciters in reading it aloud, much the way a modern actor will mark up his or her lines in a script for rhythmic, tonal, and other prosodic features. The Hebrew term for those accents that were added to the Biblical text by the Masoretes is *te’amim*; and as Meschonnic never tires of reminding us, the singular form of that word, *ta’am*, means literally “the taste in one’s mouth, flavour, flavour being the very reason for the act of saying, and it is first and foremost the meaning of orality. What comes from the mouth” (Boulanger, 2011, p. 71; see also pp. 99, 119, 136, 143, 163). “When this goes through translation,” he writes elsewhere, “it has to be mouthable” (p. 133). “To *taamicize*,” he adds, “is to oralize, in the sense where orality is no longer sound, it is subject, it is thus translating the power of a language, and no longer just what words say” (p. 141). Hölderlinizing textual signals of rhythmic accent as taste or flavor or mouthable orality would seem to indicate a desire to find a way from textuality or discursivity to the source-reader bodies that savored the Hebrew Bible between two and three millennia ago, and thus to model a corporeal response to the “poem” for target readers today; but Meschonnic is not particularly forthcoming on the exact nature of the “body” whose rhythmic language he takes to be our primary indication of the textualized subject. He mostly seems inclined to invoke what he calls the “body-in-language continuum” as a general theoretical directionality, without actually theorizing it. Or, as he himself puts it, in describing the poem as “an invasion of the body and its power in language”: “not flesh, but maximum rhythmicization” (p. 132). Or again:

By *the voice*, I mean orality. But no longer in the sense of the sign, where all we hear is sound opposed to meaning. In the continuum, orality is of the body-in-language. It is the subject we hear. The voice is of the subject passing from subject to subject. The voice makes the subject. Makes you subject. The subject makes itself in and through its voice. (Boulanger, 2011, p. 136)

The voice as orality as “the subject we hear” is for Meschonnic not a phenomenology or psychology of reading but something actually *in* the text, or emerging from the text, which is, he says, “what a subject does to its language” (Boulanger, 2011, p. 139). The circularity there is virtuous: the voice as subject is a text-effect that in effect says “I” to the reader as its “you,” and so subjectivizes the reader as someone who in turn (or perhaps simultaneously) subjectivizes the text. Circular intersubjectivization as omnidirectional knowledge-transfer. “What we hear in it is not what it says but what it does” (p. 137), and what it does is to turn us into the subjects that hear it and subjectivize it.

Rhythm for Meschonnic involves action, affect, and power, in a set temporal series or sequence that he often calls “movement,” and has the effect of regulating and intensifying meaning:

Thinking rhythm as the organization of the movement of speech ... supposes a gesturing of meaning.

In other words, more than what a text says, it is what a text does that must be translated; more than the meaning, its power, its affect.

It is in the inseparation of affect and concept that meaning finds its power and invention.

Meaning depends on the movement of meaning.

The problem is a poetic problem, in the sense where in order to hear and make heard the action and the power of speech, and not only the meaning of what is said, we must trace back the serial nature of the entire text, the sequence of the all-rhythm. Power yields meaning. Meaning, without power, is the ghost of language.

To *taamicize*, is to oralize, in the sense where orality is no longer sound, it is subject, it is thus translating the power of a language, and no longer just what words say.

(Boulanger, 2011, pp. 64, 69, 69, 120, 136, 141)

What Meschonnic is talking about here is [1] embodied discourse that is [2] serialized in time, which [3] readers experience kinesthetically as [4] the movement of other people's bodies, which [5] tend phenomenologically to blur together with our own.

1. Meschonnic follows Benveniste (1966/1971) in calling this kind of language "discourse," but it is not the disembodied discursivity of poststructuralist theory, which, as Brian Massumi (2002, p. 2) puts it, may "make and unmake sense [but] do[es] not *sense*." It is discourse as fully human speaking, as conversation with an audience. For Meschonnic the subject of the poem may not be physiologically embodied, but s/he is engaged in a performative scene that is in every way experienced through the body. He does not, so far as I have seen, explore Louis Althusser's (1969/1971) expansion of the Benvenistean "I-you" in what he calls "interpellation" or "hailing" ("Hey, you!"), let alone Judith Butler's (1999) notion of performative identities; but even in the basic Benvenistean situation as Meschonnic borrows it there would seem to be an inescapably (if for him implicitly) performative aspect. If I can subjectivize you by saying "you" to you—or, in Meschonnic's paraphrase, if "the activity of the subject is the activity by which another subject constitutes itself"—you are part of my drama, my play, my performance. And if my "I" (and thus my subjectivity) depends on my ability to subjectivize you as "you," then I am part of your drama, your performance as well. We're on stage together, performing for an audience—and the performance is rhythm. Rhythm for Meschonnic is part of what Perelman (1982, pp. 36-40; see also Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, pp. 144-148) calls "techniques of presence," the use of body language to stage meaning for an audience: to draw their attention to the things the speaker/writer considers most important, away from the things that are of secondary importance. Meschonnic says that rhythm "dictates gesturing" (Boulanger, 2011, p. 75), and gestures are for Perelman (1982) part of the rhetor's presencing repertoire, along with facial expression, posture, and tonalization; the notion that rhythm *comes first*, and so conditions the other presencing instrumentalities, probably has something to do with the fact that Meschonnic's source language, Biblical Hebrew, is an ancient language that mostly survives in written form. (Meschonnic found the Zionist resuscitation of Biblical Hebrew as a spoken as well as written language in Israel as useful a guide to the Biblical source text as "current French" was to his target text—which is to say, of no use at all.)

2. Rhythm "serializes" subjectivity. What a text does, it does in time: "In order to hear and make heard the action and the power of speech, and not only the meaning of what is said, we must trace back the serial nature of the entire text, the sequence of the all-rhythm"

(Boulanger, 2011, p. 136). What is “serial” about a written text, of course, is not the text itself, but the activity of reading it one word at a time, the reader’s eyes moving steadily across the line of print—and again, in the performative scene Meschonnic reconstructs, the *mikra* or reading-aloud of the Hebrew Bible by a reciter, that steady movement of eyes across the line of print being converted into a steady stream of rhythmic spoken (or, according to Buber [1954/1993], shouted) words. The act of reading, silently or out loud, serializes the text as spatial artifact into a temporal sequence. And it is that sequence, always emerging out of the engagement of a reader with a text, that generates subjectivity—both the reader as reading subject and the writer as writing-becoming-read subject.

3. Since for Meschonnic this (2) serial/sequential emerging of rhythm-as-subjectivity is part of (1) the *body-in-language* continuum, we might identify it as a *sense of kinesis* (movement) or kinesthesia—an experience that is had by living bodies. Gestures are kinetic-becoming-kinesic, body movements as body language, but when we *sense* our own gestures proprioceptively they are kinesthetic; and presumably, since we can’t see the gestures dictated by rhythm in a text, they are something we sense as well, another kinesthesia. And while technically “orality” or “mouthability” is an interoceptive sense (meta-representation of a body organ’s functioning from the inside), the fact that a spoken text moves through the mouth in time puts it in movement as well, yielding four (or five, depending on whether we consider rhythm and the movement of speech to be the same thing or two different things) important kinesthetic experiences that would appear for Meschonnic to be constitutive of poetic subjectivity: [a] rhythm, [b] the movement of speech, [c] the movement of meaning, [d] gestures, and [e] orality/mouthability.

4. [a] Kinesthesia is traditionally the sense of *one’s own body moving*, but the kinesthetic experiences in (3a-e) involve a sense of *other people’s bodies moving*—or, perhaps, of textuality as someone else’s mouthably rhythmic movement of speech and meaning that dictates gestures. [b] Meschonnic explicitly theorizes subjectivity as “the pursuit of a subject striving to constitute itself through its activity, but where the activity of the subject is the activity by which another subject constitutes itself” (Boulanger, 2011, p. 35); as a result, we should reframe (4a) as *another’s-becoming-one’s-own* mouthably rhythmic movement of speech and meaning that dictates gestures. [c] And since, up until the moment we pick up the source text and begin reading it, it is black marks on the page, nothing living, we should perhaps further add that (4ab) is *first* [i] our own mouthably rhythmic/constitutive movement of speech and meaning; then, by the contagion of one subject’s activity constituting another’s, *second* [ii] the “subject of the poem”; then, *finally*, in a reconstituted “chronological” sequence, [iii] the poetic subject’s mouthably rhythmic movement of speech and meaning becoming our own.

Observations (1-4) about rhythm would thus stand as a kinesthetics of rhythm-as-(inter)subjectivization. But further:

5. [a] One of Meschonnic’s oft-repeated dicta is that rhythm conditions meaning; but he does not stop there. There is no direct line of force from the kinesthetics of rhythm to the cognitive formation of meaning; the subjectivizing force he theorizes moves through affect and power as well. If we think of affect as the full range of emotions, beliefs, doubts, moods, and so on traditionally associated with it, and of power as conation—the power to move us to act—we get something like a kinesthetic-becoming-affective-becoming-conative-becoming-cognitive entelechy.

[b] As the Aristotelian term “entelechy” implies—not end-directedness, as the term is sometimes misunderstood, but “having an end within”—the key word in that (5a) sequence is “becoming.” Each separate item in the sequence is constantly in the process of becoming the next, even if in some actual cases it doesn’t click into place, as it were. Performative subjectivity as this sort of complex entelechial becoming may not become cognitive, for example: conscious, analytical, self-aware. Many writers are not aware of their own subjectivity in writing, and many translators are not aware of their own in translating. Many writers and rewriters are not aware of writing for an audience. But there is still an entelechial *movement* toward becoming self-aware.

[c] By the same token, this (5a-b) articulated entelechial subjectivity may well be described as ethical even if no human being occupying one of the subject-positions is capable of conscious ethical choice. The fact that the entelechy is forever *becoming-conative* renders it becoming-ethical. Conation is directed or guided pressure to act, and thus participates in the social ecology of becoming-communal and becoming-normative.

[d] Finally, this (5a-c) performative construction of subjectivity would not work without the circulation of kinesthetic senses, affects, conations, and cognitions through the group, from self to other(s) and from other(s) to self, mine-becoming-yours-becoming-mine, his-becoming-hers-becoming-mine-becoming-yours, and so on: my kinesthetic awareness of your body language (including the rhythms in your voice) generating not only affects and conations in me but a sympathetic sense of your subjectivity as well; my tendency to experience your affect conatively, as pressure to conform to it, and to the group norms it represents. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/1970) gives a fairly simple example of this circulation when he puts a 15-month-old toddler’s finger in his mouth and pretends to bite it, and the toddler opens *its* mouth, imitatively:

The fact is that its own mouth and teeth, as it feels them from the inside, are immediately, for it, an apparatus to bite with, and my jaw, as the baby sees it from the outside, is immediately, for it, capable of the same intentions. “Biting” has immediately, for it, an intersubjective significance. It perceives its intentions in its body, and my body with its own, and thereby my intentions in its own body. (p. 352)

Something like this event, which we now know to emerge out of the functioning of the mirror neurons, might be taken as a model for the kind of intersubjective mouthability that Meschonnic seems to want to theorize, and that I am rethinking here as rhythm-as-embodied-icosis. I coin “icosis” from Aristotle’s Greek term *eikos* “plausible,” *ta eikota* “the plausibilities,” and his claim in the *Rhetoric* that, given a choice between a story that is true but implausible and one that is plausible but untrue, we will almost always choose the latter—because it fits our (collectively normativized) understanding of the world. Icosis, then, is the collectively embodied “plausibilization” of knowledge.

## 2. Translating rhythm for rhythm

Assuming that “the subject” is that entity whose body language—namely, rhythm and other forms of orality—is among the imaginative (“pretend”) byproducts of the reading strategy that Meschonnic calls “translating the poem,” then, let us now ask: how many subjects of a source text and its translation are there? One, or two, or more? If a translator reads a source text as a poem, and constructs its rhythms and general orality as the body language of a single subject, and transfers that poem—rhythms and orality and subject and all—to the target text, does the target text now still have just one subject, or two? If in Bakhtinian (1929/1984) terms

a novel has an overt narrative voice voicing both overt characters and (covertly) the author, would the translator of that novel stand in more or less the same relationship to the author as the author stands to the narrator or the narrator to a character? Or does the translation now have *two* authors? The recent move some translation scholars (Schiavi, 1996; Baker, 2006, 2009) are making to study the “narrativity” of translating—the translator as narrator—tends to take the slight “interpretive” shifts the translator makes while rendering the source text into the target language as “signs” of active story-telling; if Meschonnic wants to deny the human inevitability of that possibility, should we take that to mean that for him translators are no more than the not-quite-human instruments of the transfer? Is it possible that for him there is only ever *one* subject in a translation, namely, the subject of the source text—because the translator’s task is to desubjectify himself or herself?

Unfortunately, these are not questions Meschonnic himself ever asks; for him “it is the poem which is both the source and the target” (Boulanger, 2011, p. 114), implying a kind of Romantic subsumption of all empirical differences between the translation and its original into the poem as mystic Oneness. I assume that his inclination to mystify what we might call the subject of math (how many subjects in a translation) has something to do with his uncertainty about the ontological status of “the poem.” Obviously, if Saussure is right that “there is not the least trace of *linguistic fact*, not the slightest possibility of gaining sight of or of defining a linguistic fact, without first adopting a point of view” (Sanders et al., 2002/2006, p. 9), then “the poem” is a (peri)performative and therefore flexible construct, as are one, two, three, or more subjects and their body language; but if that’s the case, then the hermeneuticists and phenomenologists that he despised would also be right, and that can’t be, so ... well, perhaps it’s best not to think about it too closely.

Rather than arguing about it in the abstract, though, let’s look at an example, from English translations of Meschonnic (2007):

Et le style, ce qu’on appelle ainsi, n’est que ce que le signe permet de penser de ce que fait ce qu’on appelle un poème, ou la littérature. Qu’on range à part de ce qu’on appelle le langage ordinaire. Non seulement à part, mais même on oppose communément le langage poétique au langage ordinaire. Comme un écart. (p. 16)

And style, or what we call style, is only that which the sign allows us to think of what we call a poem or literature. Which we view separately from what we call ordinary language. Not only separately, but we even frequently set it against poetic language. Like a deviation. (Boulanger, 2011, p. 43)

And style, what one calls by that name: what is it but whatever the sign permits one to think about whatever it is that makes the thing one calls a poem, or “literature”? Which one tends to stow in a separate bin from the bin called ordinary language. Not just a separate bin, in fact: one tends to regard poetic language as *opposed* to ordinary language. As a lapse. (my translation)

The first thing one notices about Meschonnic’s syntax is the series of embeddings, which have almost a house-that-Jack-built effect: “ce qu’on appelle ... n’est que ce que ... ce que fait ce qu’on appelle ... ce qu’on appelle.” Especially that third one, “ce que fait ce qu’on appelle,” seems a bit baroque, and Boulanger has simplified it to “what we call,” rendering all three *qu’on appelle* embeddings identical in English. The big change Boulanger has effected syntactically in that passage, however, is to pronominalize what she takes to be “ordinary language” in the next-to-last sentence, giving us “Not only separately, but we even frequently set it against poetic language.” Unfortunately, this rather makes hash of Meschonnic’s syntax:

“a poem or literature [is what] we view separately from what we call ordinary language [, and] not only [do we view it—poetic language—] separately, but we even frequently set it against poetic language.” That’s a fairly significant error, suggesting the kind of “hermeneutical” interpretation (and thus self-aggrandizing translator-subject) against which Meschonnic inveighed so violently; but it is not the kind of translation problem to which he would direct our primary attention.

The big problem with “Not only separately, but we even frequently set it against poetic language” for Meschonnic would be its stumbling rhythm. In fact, though Boulanger insists in her long introduction that she translated the book according to Meschonnic’s own method, she seems to be following the *words* in “Non seulement à part, mais même on oppose communément” rather than the rhythms, and thus in his terms translating the sign rather than the poem:

“Non” > “Not”  
 “seulement” > “only”  
 “à part” > “separately”  
 “mais” > “but”  
 “même on” > “we even”  
 “oppose communément” > “frequently set ... against”

Her partial pronominalization of “le langage poétique au langage ordinaire” as “it against poetic language” introduces the syntactic-becoming-semantic confusion, of course; but rhythmically it also introduces a utilitarian flatness into the sentence, a *Good News Bible* sort of flatness, and that for Meschonnic is a worse failing in a translation than not making the right kind of sense. In fact, Meschonnic claims that rhythm *is* what makes a stretch of discourse make sense. So when following Meschonnic literally from “Non seulement à part” to “Not only separately,” Boulanger should be paying attention to the fact that “Non seulement” and “Not only” have different rhythms, as do “à part” and “separately,” and that those rhythms are going to have the effect of constructing meaning differently. And when after the comma she reproduces “mais même on oppose communément” as “but we even frequently set,” she needs to feel the semantic effects of the rhythmic shifts (B = strong beat, b = weak beat):

Meschonnic: Non seulement à part, mais même on oppose communément  
 - - b - B | - b - - B - - - B  
 Boulanger: Not only separately, but we even frequently set  
 - b - B - - | - - b - B - - B

The obvious rhythmic problem one faces when translating “prosody for prosody, metaphor for metaphor, pun for pun, rhythm for rhythm” (Boulanger, 2011, p. 71) from French to English is that French words are all stressed on the final syllable, and English words distribute stress more complexly; but that is really only a problem if one insists on following the French source text more or less literally, as Boulanger does. (Note that Meschonnic does not write “prosody for prosody *and* word for word.”) And the crippling rhythmic problem in Boulanger’s translation there, the series of unstressed syllables divided by a pause (“separately, but we”), is not really a function of the different word-based stress patterns between the two languages. My rendition of that passage is not an exact reproduction of Meschonnic’s rhythm, but it manages the rhythmic transition through the pause in the middle in a similar way:

Meschonnic: Non seulement à part, mais même on oppose communément

- - b - B | - B - - B - - - B

Robinson: Not just a separate bin, in fact: one tends to regard

- - - b - B - B || - B - - B

There “communément” is rendered semantically not with “frequently” but with the rhythmically punchier “tends to,” making it possible to reproduce “mais même on oppose,” the first five syllables after the pause, rhythmically with the rhythmically identical “one tends to regard”; compare the rhythmic dropouts if one shifts to “one generally thinks” or “one usually thinks” or “one often thinks.” I’ve indicated the longer pause instigated by the colon with a double pipe; that longer pause seems to me to compensate for the dropping of the disjunctive “but.” I’ve also doubled the iambic - B pattern leading up to that pause, with “separate bin, in fact”; my translation would stand rhythmically closer to Meschonnic’s original if I dropped “in fact”:

Meschonnic: Non seulement à part, mais même on oppose communément

- - b - B | - B - - B - - B

\*Robinson: Not just a separate bin: one tends to regard

- - - b - B || - B - - B

My “ear” tells me, though—and one of the questions I want to examine in a moment is what this “ear” is, and how it tells me things, and what it tells us as scholars of translation about the translator as subject—that the soft nasal [n] at the end of that first phrase, “separate bin,” is not strong enough to set up a good effective contrast; “in fact” is a much crisper prosodic equivalent of “à part.” Also, of course, with “in fact” in the passage I have the same number of beats (one weak followed by four strong) as Meschonnic; I’ve just shifted the pause one beat later.

Like the colon after “in fact,” too, the colon after “what one calls by that name” creates a longer pause that I think approximates the heavy beat on the second syllable of *ainsi* (try reading it with a comma there instead, how much weaker the rhythm is that way). Punctuation is in general a popular strategy for manipulating the rhythms of written text: cf. the way the comma after “poem” (replicating Meschonnic’s) helps organize the rhythm of that two-item list into a rethinking, how putting quotation marks around “literature” retards our attack on *lit*- just long enough to approximate the rhythmic effect of the lost definite article, and so on.

The complex organizing power rhythm has on semantics is especially clear in a phrase like this:

M: Qu’on range à part de ce qu’on appelle le langage ordinaire

- b - B - b - - B - - B - - B

B: Which we view separately from what we call ordinary language

- - b B - - - - - B - - b -

R: Which one tends to stow in a separate bin from the bin called ordinary language

- - b - B - - B - b - - B - B - - b -

Note that again I could have followed Meschonnic’s rhythm in “range à part” more closely, but again my ear tells me that that would have pushed me closer to the (to that same ear problematically) long series of unstressed syllables in Boulanger’s translation:



\*R: Which one stows apart from what one calls ordinary language

- - B - B - - - - B - - b -

And in any case collocationally in English it seems odd to *stow language* (or restack language, reshelve language, put language away); the fact that we don't normally use that verb as a trope for categorization is almost certainly why Boulanger shifted metaphors from packing to looking. Once I had decided to translate "metaphor for metaphor," as Meschonnic expressly prefers, I had to consider whether and how to naturalize the odd-sounding collocation; and when it occurred to me that we tend to collocate stowing with *bins* in English, it also became clear that bins would help me work with Meschonnic's - B and - - B rhythmic patterns (iamb and anapest), even if I had to multiply them a little, by adding "from the bin."

A similar slight proliferation of iambs proceeds from my unpacking of "one stows" to "one tends to stow"; more complicated and therefore more problematic (but also more interesting) rhythmic reduplications or expansions can be found in the various moves from "que" to "whatever," and "whatever it is that," and "the thing":

M: ce que fait ce qu'on appelle un poème

- - b - - - b - - B

R: whatever it is that makes the thing one calls a poem

- b - - b - b - b - b - B

—that lived in the house that Jack built. Obviously the rhythm of that cumulative nursery rhyme has shaped my ear for the "natural" English rhythms there.

### 3. What is an "ear" for language?

So, then, let's think about this "ear" of mine, in three goes: [1] the importance of the ear for "good" translation à la Meschonnic, [2] the nature of the ear, and [3] what the ear tells us about the translator's subjectivity.

1. Obviously, without a good strong ear for the rhythms and other prosodic features of the target language, and a reasonably good ear for the source language, no translator could translate "well" as Meschonnic defines translating well. It is widely believed that the only translators who will have a good enough ear to translate well in that sense are native speakers of the target language, especially when the source text is literary or otherwise prosodically heightened; and while that is not necessarily true empirically—I have read brilliant poetry translations by native speakers of the source language—it is certainly true in the aggregate that native speakers of the target language are *likelier* to have a stronger ear for its rhythms and other prosodic features than nonnative speakers. It seems that long exposure to the icosis of language-learning in early childhood has an especially powerful shaping effect on (2bc) the icotic construct that we call the ear. It almost certainly isn't sufficient: many people have a demonstrably weak ear for the rhythms of their own first language. Early, long, and intensive immersion in the icosis of language-learning must apparently be combined with an eager and sensuous and even loving attentiveness to that icosis, a fully kinesthetic-becoming-affective-becoming-conative-becoming-cognitive participation in that icosis. I'm not sure what Pier-Pascale Boulanger's strongest language is, but based on the circumstantial evidence of her French name, the fact that she's a professor of French at Concordia in Montreal, and the fact that her translation is peppered with nonnativisms—"This position which believes to be dealing with the nature of things" (2011, p. 85), for "Cette position qui croit avoir affaire à

une nature des choses” (Meschonnic, 2007, p. 78), “Tchekov” (Boulanger, 2011, p. 131) for what Meschonnic (2007, p. 142) spells Tchékhouv and English-speakers would spell Chekhov—I’m guessing it’s not English and probably French. But again, the mere *fact* that her strongest language is this or that is less important than the intensity and duration and enthusiasm with which she has devoted herself to the icosis of rhythm in English—and the above comparisons suggest pretty strongly that she is markedly deficient in that area, that she has a rather weak ear for the rhythms of English.

2. So what is an “ear” for rhythm? [a] In Meschonnic’s own terms, “an ear for rhythm” is a bit of a misnomer. It would have to be at least an ear *and* a mouth for rhythm—and most likely the two are in some way inseparable. As Boulanger (2011) rewrites Meschonnic:

The roles are reversed. It is the reversibility of listening. The encounter takes place in a moment where we relate to the infinite of history and to the infinite of meaning. A voice hearing its own history, a voice speaking its history is heard as a recitative. What we hear in it is not what it says but what it does. What it does to itself, to the one speaking it, and also what it does to the one hearing it. It transforms. It does what we do not know to be hearing. The work of listening is to recognize at certain moments, unpredictably, all we did not know we were hearing. The mouth to ear becomes the mouth to mouth.

The voice shows that it is with the mouth that we hear best. (p. 137)

Even when we are reading silently, what the ear hears, the mouth tests; what the mouth voices, the ear tests. These are typically what we would want to call the *mind’s ear* and the *mind’s mouth*: we don’t literally hear a voice when we read silently, and ever since Augustine reported his own and his mother’s astonishment when they walked past Ambrose’s room and noticed that he was reading without moving his lips (*Confessions VI.3*), we don’t typically mumble half-aloud the words we are reading on the page. Sometimes we do, of course, especially when it is absolutely essential that our translation be what Meschonnic calls “mouthable,” as when translating nursery rhymes, or translating for a theater production or film dubbers; but even there long experience in that kind of translation work tends to shift the testing from the physical mouth-and-ear to the mind’s mouth-and-ear. Recognizing that there is also a signal continuity between bodily hearing and mental hearing, and between the physical feel of sound being produced by the mouth and the mental feel of sound being produced by the mouth, we might want to say that our quarry in this section is “the body-becoming-mind’s mouth-and-ear for rhythm.” (Or should we go further, and include in the definition tapping feet, drumming fingers, bobbing heads, and the movements of dance? Is it possible to grandfather all that into to the “body” of “body-becoming-mind”?)

Incorporating some discoveries from (1), we can now suggest that while [b] the body-becoming-mind’s mouth-and-ear for rhythm is in an important sense an icotic construct—built up through long and intense and sensuous (etc.) icotic interaction with other speakers of the language—it is specifically [c] the kind of icotic construct that tests the validity or authenticity or “truthiness” of other icotic constructs, and thus a kind of icotic metaconstruct. Icosis is the socioecological process through which a community transforms individual opinions into what come to feel like ontologically reliable realities and truths; the body-becoming-mind’s mouth-and-ear for rhythm is one of the semi-individualized quasicollective “controls” or regulatory monitors of any given utterance’s proximity to icotic ideals for not only elegance and pith but actual truth, semantic and thus “ontological” reliability. (This is one sense in which one might be inclined to take Oscar Wilde’s [1889/1969, p. 305] quip that “Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style” as a stylish truth.)

3. So if rhythm and other forms of mouthable orality are the body language of the subject in the source text, [a] are they not equally the body language of the subject in the target text? Think of the fact that my rhythmic choices in reproducing Meschonnic's French rhythms emerged strongly out of my own cultural background in English: not only familiarity with "The House That Jack Built" and other such cumulative rhymes but a feel for the collocations of "stow" (with "bins" more strongly than with "language"). As the students of "the translator as narrator" would insist, it doesn't matter how hard I work to reproduce Meschonnic's rhythms as source-accurately and target-effectively as possible, I will always inevitably inflect my translations with my own icotic subjectivity—my own itericotic sense of the best possible English equivalence for his French originals. (By "itericotic" I mean that I inevitably repeat or reiterate formations I've seen before, read before, and have seen and read specifically as contributions to icosis, so that what I am "expressing" iteratively is not just "myself" but the group; but by Derrida's [1988] nonprinciple of iterability I inevitably introduce difference into each iteration. The tensions between pressures to conform and tendencies to divagate that Derrida theorizes as iterability are the default interactive channel of ecological emergence in both ecosis and icosis.)

And if the translator inevitably brings a separate subjectivity to a translation task, doesn't that also mean that [b] *anybody* picking up a text and reading it is a subject, brings his or her own itericotic subjectivity to its reading and understanding? This is the core insight of reader-response theory, of course, which emerges out of German phenomenology, and thus a directionality Meschonnic would likely prefer to disavow; but it seems inescapable to me. If the translated text as it leaves the translator's hands seems to contain at least the source author's voice and subjectivity and the translator's voice and subjectivity, surely every target reader who picks it up will further inflect it with his or her own rhythms-becoming-voice-becoming-subjectivity as well?

More, if "what [the voice] does to itself, to the one speaking it, and also what it does to the one hearing it" is that "it transforms," shouldn't we also conclude that [c] the subjectivity of "the poem" (say, the source text, though Meschonnic insists that the poem is *both* source and target) has a transformative effect on the subjectivity of the reader?

And if we take Meschonnic at his word that "more than what a text says, it is what a text does that must be translated" (Boulanger, 2011, p. 69), doesn't that also mean that [d] the translator is a subject whose work will invariably have a transformative effect on the target reader's subjectivity? And, further, that [e] the translator should seek to *optimize* the desired effect, by manipulating the target reader's uptake of the target text in whatever way possible? (3e) is what the German action-oriented theorists call *skopos*, of course; but given Meschonnic's requirement that the translator "invent discourse equivalences in the target language: prosody for prosody, metaphor for metaphor, pun for pun, rhythm for rhythm" (Boulanger, 2011, p. 71), my guess is that he expects the translator to optimize the transformative effect the target text has on the target reader's subjectivity so as to be similar to the one the source text had on the source reader's subjectivity. This of course, if my guess is right, would render Meschonnic's attack on Nida's (1964) dynamic equivalence as "behaviorist" a red herring: Meschonnic here stands revealed as defending a theory of translating that at least implicitly is uncannily similar to Nida's. What is different about their two theories lies in the specific kind of transformative effect they want to have on their readers: Nida, who only ever admits in print to wanting to *inform* Bible readers about Christianity, does presumably want to convert them to Christianity, or to support those who

have already converted; Meschonnic has no such desire, though of course his stated intention is to transform people's thinking, which is presumably a kind of conversion experience—but not conversion to an established set of beliefs.

#### 4. Conclusion

If again we assume that Meschonnic *wanted* to follow Saussure in the notion that “there is not the least trace of *linguistic fact*, not the slightest possibility of gaining sight of or of defining a linguistic fact, without first adopting a point of view” (Sanders et al., 2002/2006, p. 9), the solution to these problems is easy, but maybe too easy: [4] there is not the least trace of subjectivity without first adopting a point of view. On rhythm, on orality, on mouthability, on equivalence (dynamic and otherwise), and on what the target reader needs and what the target reader wants and what effect any given translation will have on the target reader, there are only points of view.

Meschonnic despised that kind of easy relativism, but it does seem to be implied in the Saussurean principle he repeated so often; in the extended version of the series below, picking up (1-4) from just above and continuing below with (5), I suggest some damage control, protecting the perspectivism he favored against *easy* relativism, by way of bringing this essay to a close:

- [1] To translate well, a translator must have a good ear for rhythm.
- [2] An ear for rhythm is actually [a] the body-becoming-mind's mouth-and-ear for rhythm as [b] the icotic agent of the group in each individual, the task of which is [c] icotic quality control (phenomenological testing for style-as-truth).
- [3] If rhythm is the body language of the subject, and (1-2) the translator has to be able to feel and produce rhythm in his or her whole body-becoming-mind, then the translator too brings subjectivity to the job of translating the rhythms of the poem that is the source text.
  - [a] The translator is “the subject” (if there has to be only one) of the target text in very much the same way that the source author is (construed as) “the subject” of the source text.
  - [b] Every target reader resubjectivizes the target text.
  - [c] The source text has a transformative effect on the subjectivities of its readers.
  - [d] The target text too has an effect on the subjectivities of its readers.
  - [e] The translator should seek to manipulate the target text so as to optimize (3d).
- [4] On the subject, rhythm, orality, mouthability, and so on there are only points of view.
- [5] The subject, while a social fiction, is also a point of view (a way of seeing/reading or being seen/read).
- [6] The fact that (5) subjects are points of view makes them flexible and mutable enough to split and merge, expand and shrink.
  - [a] The subject of an “I” may be impersonal; the subject of a “one” may be intensely personal. Benveniste and Meschonnic to the contrary, pronouns don't lock subjectivity in.
  - [b] Neither do the deictic pronouns and proadverbs Benveniste studies in “The nature of pronouns” (1966/1971, pp. 217-222): “this,” “that,” “here,” “now.” If the source text's subject-of-enunciation says “this French language that I'm speaking right here and now,” all those deictics seem to Benveniste (and presumably to Meschonnic as well, though he doesn't raise the point) to lock subjectivity into a

single subject's single momentary and localized event—but they don't, really. All of them can be inhabited imaginatively by translators and other readers. It's possible for the reader of an English translation to reimagine reading in English as reading in French; and even to reimagine a French-speaker who claims in English translation to be speaking temporarily in English as someone speaking a foreign language.

- [7] If we think (5-6) through Meschonnic's body-in-language continuum, we might want to revise Saussure's dictum about there being only points of view on language to say that "language is only heard by different mouths, and only voiced by different ears." That adds the body language of the subject to the mix, obviously, and also grounds Saussure's perspectivism (peri)performatively in the passage of time, or what Meschonnic calls "serial semantics." Because we experience language in the body, we experience those semantics in time; by contrast the visual metaphor in "point of view" tends to imply a tidy spatialization of that temporality.
- [8] Thinking (7) icotically also complicates what seems like the too-easy relativism of perspectivism (it's all just perspective, so rhythm and the rest are mere gossamer images, like the shadows on Plato's wall).
- [a] If subjectivity is an icotic construct, it's not just that it takes a subject to recognize a subject; it takes a whole lot of subjects to create a subject, and the social ecology of subjectivity by default makes subjects recognizable to each other.
  - [b] Epistemologically speaking, there is nothing more than subjective perspectives. What converts those perspectives into what feels like reality is the somatic grounding of icosis.
- [9] A series of expanding icotic rehearsals/revoicings of (8) should remind us that the translator participates in many larger icotic processes as well:
- [a] The translator shares at least one culture (and thus an icotic process) with the source author and at least one other with the target reader.
  - [b] It's not just that (3a) every translator resubjectivizes the source text and (3b) every target reader resubjectivizes the target text, or even that those resubjectivizations stand in complex relations of icotic *sprechen/entsprechen* mutuality with (3cd) the transformative effects of all texts on the subjectivities of their readers; it's also that source-cultural icoses shape the mutual subjectivizations of the source author and translator in the reciprocal construction of the source text, and target-cultural icoses shape the mutual subjectivizations of the translator and the target reader in the reciprocal construction of the translation.
  - [c] The translator's mediation between the source-cultural and target-cultural icoses is typically shaped by long icotic participation not merely in both of those cultures, but also in the interculture of translators, interpreters, and other language mediators, both professional and amateur (domestic interpreting in bilingual or multilingual households, community interpreting, and so on).
  - [d] "Civilizational" icoses, sometimes large territorial civilizations like Europe and Asia, sometimes defined by empires (Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, Ottoman, British, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, American, etc.) and their postcolonial aftermaths, including languages and language families, religions, economies, governmental structures, and so on, often guide the translator's mediation between two language-based cultures within a single larger "civilizational" area.

- [e] Icoses of late-capitalist transnationalist “modernity”, often euphemized as “globalization”, exert a shaping icotic influence on translatorial mediations over even larger territorial and temporal spans.
- [f] Pan-cultural icoses, often euphemized as “universals”—based on the fact that almost all humans have the same body structure, including evolutionary brain architecture, articulatory and sensory organs, shape and function of hands, upright stance, and so on—exert a powerful icotic influence on translatorial (and most other human) mediations everywhere.
- [i] The fact that there is always considerable local variation doesn’t change the fact that these pan-cultural similarities are organized icotically: icosis and ecosis by definition engage with local variation, organize impulses to smooth it out, but never entirely successfully.
- [ii] The fact that pan-cultural similarities exist doesn’t change the fact of icosis either—doesn’t make them “natural” universals. Icosis is the only plausible explanation for the four or five or forty-five “linguistic universals” that linguists (see e.g. Greenberg, 1963/1966, 1978; Chomsky, 1986, 2000; Mairal & Gil, 2006) claim to have found, for example.

## 5. References

- Althusser, Louis (1969/1971). *Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (Notes toward an investigation)* (Ben Brewster, Trans.). In Louis Althusser (Ed.), *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (pp. 121-173). London: New Left Books.
- Baker, Mona (2006). *Translation and conflict: A narrative account*. London: Routledge.
- Baker, Mona (2009). Resisting state terror: Theorising communities of activist translators and interpreters. In Esperança Bielsa Mialet & Chris Hughes (Eds.), *Globalisation, political violence and translation* (pp. 222-242). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1929/1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky’s poetics* (Caryl Emerson, Ed. & Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Benveniste, Émile (1966/1971). *Problems in general linguistics* (Mary Elizabeth Meek, Trans.). Coral Gables: University of Miami Press.
- Boulanger, Pier-Pascale (2011). *Ethics and politics of translating*. Translation of Meschonnic (2007). Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Buber, Martin (1954/1993). On the diction of a German translation of the Scripture (Douglas Robinson, Trans.). *Translation and Literature*, 2, 105-110.
- Butler, Judith (1999). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (Reprint). London: Routledge.
- Chomsky, Noam (1986). *Knowledge of language: Its nature, origin and use*. New York: Praeger.
- Chomsky, Noam (2000). *New horizons in the study of language and mind*. Cambridge University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1988). *Limited Inc.* (Gerald Graff, Ed., Samuel Weber & Jeffrey Mehlmann, Trans.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Greenberg, Joseph H. (1963/1966). Some universals of grammar: With particular reference to the order of meaningful elements. In Joseph H. Greenberg (Ed.), *Universals of Language* (pp. 73-113). Retrieved from <http://ling.kgw.tu-berlin.de/Korean/Artikel02/>
- Greenberg, Joseph H. (Ed.). (1978). *Universals of human language*. Stanford University Press.
- Mairal, Roberto & Juana Gil (Eds.). (2006). *Linguistic universals*. Cambridge University Press.
- Massumi, Brian (2002). *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1945/1970). *Phenomenology of perception* (Colin Smith, Trans.). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Meschonnic, Henri (trans. 1970). *Les Cinq Rouleaux (Le chant des chants, Ruth, Comme ou les lamentations, Parole du sage, Esther)*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Meschonnic, Henri (trans. 1981). *Jona et le signifiant errant*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Meschonnic, Henri (trans. 2001). *Gloires, traduction des psaumes*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer.
- Meschonnic, Henri (trans. 2002). *Au commencement, traduction de La Genèse*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer.

- Meschonnic, Henri (trans. 2003). *Les Noms, traduction de L'Exode*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer.
- Meschonnic, Henri (trans. 2005). *Et il appelé, traduction du Lévitique*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer.
- Meschonnic, Henri (2007). *Ethique et politique du traduire*. Paris: Verdier.
- Nida, Eugene (1964). *Towards a science of translating: With special reference to principles and procedures involved in Bible translating*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Perelman, Chaim (1982). *The realm of rhetoric* (William Kluback, Trans.). University of Notre Dame Press.
- Perelman, Chaim & Olbrechts-Tyteca, Lucie (1969). *The new rhetoric: A treatise on argumentation* (John Wilkinson & Purcell Weaver, Trans.). University of Notre Dame Press.
- Sanders, Carol, Pires, Matthew, & Figueroa, Peter (trans. 2002/2006). Ferdinand de Saussure, *Writings in general linguistics*. Edited by Simon Bouquet and Rudolf Engler. Oxford University Press.
- Schiavi, Giuliana (1996). There is always a teller in a tale. *Target*, 8(1), 1-21.
- Wilde, Oscar (1969). The decay of lying. In Richard Ellmann (Ed.), *The artist as critic: Critical writings of Oscar Wilde* (pp. 290-320). (Original work published in 1889). University of Chicago Press.



Douglas Robinson

Hong Kong Baptist University

[robinson@hkbu.edu.hk](mailto:robinson@hkbu.edu.hk)

**Biography:** Douglas Robinson is Dean of Arts and Chair Professor of English at Hong Kong Baptist University, and author of numerous books and articles on translation, including *The Translator's Turn*, *Translation and Taboo*, *Becoming a Translator*, *Western Translation Theory from Herodotus to Nietzsche*, *Who Translates?*, *Translation and the Problem of Sway*, and *Schleiermacher's Icoses*.