

Learning as Translation in Our Own Lives: Interpreting *Lost in Translation*

SANGEUN LEE

UCL IOE & Andong National University

Abstract

I want to explore the meaning of 'learning as translation' by interpreting the film Lost in Translation, drawing on Stanley Cavell's idea. Especially in this article, I pay attention to the feeling of lostness appearing in the protagonist of the movie, Charlotte. She is in Tokyo for the first time, accompanying her photographer-husband who is there for work. At first glance, her wandering mind and confusion seem to be a response to linguistic and cultural differences. A closer look reveals, however, problems in her sense of identity, with her lack of career, and with family, rather than just in her exposure to this unfamiliar Japanese culture. She is confused about her relationship with her husband and about what she has done after college. In particular, when it comes to Charlotte's previous learning experiences, if we pay close attention to the college she attended, her major, and her career problems, we can rethink the meaning of learning in life. In this paper, I am going to divide Charlotte's learning experiences into two types: one is learning as initiation into a course of study (and, that is, into a particular curricular content), and the other is learning as translation of the meaning in the course of one's own life. After examining these two possibilities of learning, I suggest that the learning that matters most involves a transformation of the self through translation, appropriate to the particular context of one's life.

INTRODUCTION

There are times in our lives when we lose our way. We find ourselves in situations where we do not know who we are, where we are going, or what we must do. Charlotte, the protagonist of the movie *Lost in Translation*, is in Tokyo for the first time, accompanying her photographer-husband who is there for work. At first glance, then, her wandering mind and confusion seem to be a response to linguistic and cultural differences. A closer look reveals, however, problems in her sense of identity, with her lack of career, and with family, rather than just in her exposure to this unfamiliar Japanese culture. She is confused about her relationship with her husband and about what she has done after college. One night she goes to karaoke with friends, and the song she sings reflects this well: "I wink at you. I'm going to captivate you. Look at me... I'll make you look only at me. So, you can see no one but me. I'm special. I'm very special." In reality, Charlotte thinks she fears she is nothing special. Her song expresses her dissatisfaction with herself, ironically through a desire to become special.

In this article, I consider the reason for Charlotte's lethargy and aimlessness to be related to the difficulty not so much of translating from one language and culture to another but of translating one's sense of the meaning of one's life from one phase into something new. Here, we need to take into account Charlotte's previous learning experiences. If we pay close attention to the college she attended, her major, and her career problems, we can rethink the

meaning of learning in life. Drawing on the thinking of Stanley Cavell, and based on this protagonist who is lost in her life, I want to explore *Lost in Translation*, as expressing the idea of “learning as translation.” To this end, I am going to divide learning into two types: one is learning as initiation into a course of study (and, that is, into a particular curricular content), and the other is learning as translation of the meaning in the course of one’s own life. After examining these two possibilities of learning, I suggest that the learning that matters most involves a transformation of the self through translation, appropriate to the particular context of one’s life.

TWO WAYS OF LEARNING

Learning as Initiation into a Course of Study

Charlotte has graduated from Yale with a degree in philosophy. Considering that she has majored in a discipline that explores human existence and the meaning of life, there is perhaps some irony in the fact that she is lost and wandering in this way. Her academic history indicates her intelligence, that she is an elite. Her college diploma can be regarded as evidence of her basic understanding of philosophy. She has perhaps learned from the university curriculum something of what the good life is, about how human existence can be understood, and what forms of human relationships are desirable. This can be understood as “learning as initiation into a course of study.” Through her courses in philosophy at an Ivy League university, she has entered the long history of the “conversation of mankind,” a conversation about human beings and the world. She already has the relevant knowledge, we might assume, regarding human existence and the relationship between human beings and the world, and she has insight into the thinking of the great philosophers. Nonetheless, she is lost and is wandering in her own life. How are we to interpret this?

Some might view her as what William Deresiewicz (2014) calls an “excellent sheep.” Deresiewicz criticises American Ivy League students in this way: they look smart and competent but are in reality anxious, timid, and lost, with little intellectual curiosity. But is it reasonable to view Charlotte’s lostness so negatively? From the perspective of those who advocate a competency-based curriculum that emphasises the application of college education to real-life contexts, her wanderings and confusion after college may be criticised. They are likely to argue that the Yale philosophy curriculum failed to develop students’ competencies, or that she lacked practical skills. Her learning was too academic and not sufficiently connected to the real world. Behind this assessment is the tendency to view learning as the transmission of knowledge or transfer of skills.

But we can, I believe, interpret her lostness differently. Cavell’s concept of “philosophy as translation” provides a new understanding of Charlotte’s wandering and confusion. Although Charlotte studied philosophy as a discipline by completing a series of courses in a university curriculum, she finds it challenging to translate her scholarly learning appropriately into the context of her own life. Her character suggests another dimension of learning, and this cannot be satisfied only by studying human existence through a formal curriculum. Her wanderings and confusion can be understood as connected to the trials of translation.

Learning as translation in the course of life

The meaning of learning as translation

Translation is commonly understood, of course, as the matching of the words of one language against those of another, ideally to realise the same meaning (Standish, 2022). Charlotte's frustration and loneliness may appear to be a matter of translation between two different cultures and languages, of the United States and Japan. We can view it differently, however, by relating it to learning. Charlotte has entered a stage in her life when a new identity is required of her. She finds herself in a situation where she must interpret her existence and her relationship with others differently. In particular, after graduating from college, she experiences a new relationship with her husband through marriage, and amid changes that require her to enter society as an independent adult, she has to rethink her existence and purpose in her life. In this situation, her lostness can be viewed as a by-product of the process of translating the curricular language about human beings she learned in college, into something with real meaning in the context of her life. She has already learned philosophers' ideas about human existence and other minds. In the face of change that demands that she also change, however, she is driven towards something new. The texts of her university curriculum contain not only countless words about human beings and the world, but also residual statements that do not cover all the literal meanings recorded on the page (Saito, 2022). The reader is left to find those meanings. In this sense, I believe Charlotte's learning can be expressed as "learning as translation": she undergoes a kind of translation.

The process of translation in learning

The process of translation involves the judgement of the translator. Usually, translating words from language A to language B is considered a technical task. This, however, is at odds with Cavell's demonstration of what he calls the projective nature of language: the words of a language are not fixed in their meaning; rather, their meanings are always open to new possibilities, through new combinations of symbols in different contexts (Cavell, 1979). This is true not only in translating between different languages, but also, as I want to show, in translating the curricular content into meaning in the individual's life. Regarding how to interpret the texts one reads in philosophy, for example, there is no one correct answer; the possibilities of interpretation are always open. The perfect translation is impossible, but the process of translating the meaning of one's life is indispensable to living a good life.

In *Lost in Translation*, Charlotte is placed in a seemingly untranslatable situation, where what she learned from books cannot be translated and applied directly in her life. At the same time, although she faces ambiguous and unclear meanings, she proves herself to be capable of education: she tries to interpret what she experiences through her own judgement. Learning as translation is not undertaken only at a certain period in life, such as when within the formal curriculum of a school or university; it is a constant process, a possibility of education, throughout one's life. Bob, a successful middle-aged actor who lives a life different from Charlotte's in many ways — different in age, sex, and occupation — also suffers from a sense of emptiness and loneliness associated with an apparent barrier to moving on, a barrier in the process of finding new meaning and purpose in his life. The pain involved in the process of

translation, a kind of pain of rebirth, is not something that can be simply avoided or resolved. Rather, it is like the growing pains experienced in the process of leaving behind one's familiar identity. Even if Charlotte and Bob successfully complete the process of translation, they will surely in the future face other challenges in translation. Learning seems to be a process of maturing into a better being, through translations at each period of one's life.

Moreover, the meaning of life through translation is not fixed but changes according to the temporal and spatial context of each person's life. In this regard, Cavell points to transitivity and volatility as characteristics of language and inherent in the process of translation. This denial of a fixed sense should not, however, be taken as supporting relativism or scepticism. The point, for Cavell, is rather that we have no choice but to interpret the texts that confront us — that is the books but also the variety of situations that confront us — using our own judgement in our respective contexts; the community's criteria always test its appropriateness. Since we cannot guarantee the certainty of meaning based on our own judgement, we need to humbly leave open the possibility of error, the chance that it can be wrong, rather than settling complacently or over-confidently with that judgement: we need to be receptive to the process of translation. In other words, we need to exercise our judgement in trying to adjust unclear forms of expression in response to our community. Moreover, we contribute most to our community when our words and actions show new possibilities of life. This involves an ongoing process of “learning as translation.”

The condition of translation for learning

Under what conditions does translation take place? It seems that the translation that leads to finding new meaning in one's life and to a kind of rebirth occurs in encounters with others. Rather than sinking into oneself in a familiar environment, we can succeed in finding a new self by, for instance, meeting others in an unfamiliar environment. It is interesting that in *Lost in Translation*, the environment surrounding Charlotte and Bob, as they search for the meaning of their lives, is Japan, an unfamiliar culture, instead of America, which is familiar to them. The film is set in Japan. The environment in which the story takes place is Japan. More precisely, the encounter with others takes place in a hotel in downtown Tokyo, where English is spoken as an international language, instead of a place where they cannot communicate, since they do not speak Japanese. Although it is possible to communicate to some extent in the hotel, it is a “familiar yet strange place” for both Charlotte and Bob, as heterogeneous cultures and diverse people coexist, far from the United States that is familiar to them. This place provides the conditions under which learning as translation takes place. In Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1986), — which Cavell (1992) has described as a work that shows the transformation from one form of life to another —, Lake Walden, where Thoreau settled in search of a new form of life, is geographically totally different from Tokyo, and yet it provides surprisingly similar conditions. Thoreau also searches for the possibility of a new life in a place located away from the familiar town, but in one that was not completely isolated; about a mile from the town, it is close enough for his neighbours to visit. Places that are not isolated but distinct from what is familiar afford conditions under which familiar things look unfamiliar.

Lost in Translation portrays the alienation and despondency of Charlotte and Bob as they undergo this strange and perhaps transformative experience. The film does not directly show

whether their translation is successful; it is not explicit about whatever new meaning they find in their lives or about or how their lives are changed through what happens. The movie ends with the characters returning to their familiar lives after a quiet farewell, without a visually surprising dramatic ending. Bob returns to the United States, and Charlotte once again walks alone into strange downtown Tokyo. It is neither a happy nor a sad ending. The director focuses on the process of translation rather than its results. The movie's ending reveals another feature of the translation process: it is primarily about returning to one's ordinary life, rather than leaving it for a completely different place, transforming one's existence rather than changing one's environment, and finding it worthwhile to try new possibilities in a familiar place. The final scene where Charlotte continues seeking her direction in life as she walks step by step into the crowd in downtown Tokyo shows that attitude towards life is an appropriate condition for the translation process. Even if Bob and Charlotte return to their daily lives without a fantastic change in appearance, they will continue their translation work, in a continual process of rebirth, as new beings every day. Thoreau says of his daily bathing in the lake that it is a daily baptism. The lives of Bob and Charlotte will welcome a new morning through mourning. Learning as translation focuses on reshaping oneself, rather than changing the world, and it is a task throughout one's life.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS LEARNING FOR SELF-TRANSFORMATION

In this article, I have explored the meaning of "learning as translation" by interpreting the movie *Lost in Translation*. Learning as translation is ultimately learning for self-transformation, a form of learning that aims at a kind of rebirth, not a once-and-for-all change but rather a more continual readiness for change. I divided Charlotte's learning experiences into two types. First, I considered learning as initiation into a course of study, which I related to the "conversation of mankind." Whereas this is important, I wanted to contrast it with something different: learning as translation in the course of life. An essential feature of this learning, which relates to the unique meaning of one's own life, is that it brings changes into one's existence, beyond one's knowledge. Learning as initiation into a course of study is generally taken to be what education is. Through Charlotte's wandering and through the conflicts she faces, we see that such learning alone does not suffice in the pursuit of the good life. In other words, when we try to relate the meaning of what we learned in school or university to the particular contexts of our own lives, we always face ambiguous and unclear situations, and these require personal judgements appropriate to the context of each person's life. This translation involves wandering and some pain; but these can be worthwhile and meaningful. On a personal level, it will lead to a transformation of the self, and at a more public level, the newly translated meaning in each person's life will further enrich the possibilities of life as a whole.

The implication for the university education of learning as translation is that it is necessary to expand the meaning of the curriculum beyond the course of study and into the course of life. We need to examine whether learning in universities today primarily remains confined to learning as initiation into a course of study. Through learning as translation, each student can find their own voice in the process of translating the truth of life into the context of their own life. The process of translation is one of wandering and suffering in the face of intransigent problems. The attitudes and mindsets that learners reveal in this process differ from the goal

orientation and the emphasis on initiative, self-efficacy, activism, and confidence evident recently in the discourse of student agency (OECD, 2019), which is gaining currency as a new vision for future education. Rather than conviction and efficacy in achieving predictable goals, students in the process of learning as translation will likely show a cautious and humble attitude that their judgement could be wrong. Rather than displaying a spirit of enterprise to change the world, they will pay more attention to the transformation of their own being. Here, Cavell's idea, that true learning takes place when the student moves towards transforming their existence from mourning to morning (Cavell, 1992) is also relevant. We need to reflect on whether the nature of the learning pursued in current university education overlooks these significant possibilities of learning as translation.

REFERENCES

- Cavell, S. (1979) *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Scepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cavell, S. (1992) *The Senses of Walden*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Deresiewicz, W. (2014) *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*. New York: Free Press.
- OECD (2019) *OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030: Concept Note - OECD Learning Compass 2030*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.
- Saito, N. (2022) Thinking about Education through Film. Presentation in Kyoto and UCL Institute of Education colloquium.
- Standish, P. (2022) Derrida: *Lost in Translation* and *Babel*. Presentation in Kyoto and UCL Institute of Education colloquium.
- Thoreau, H. D. (1986) *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.