The stranger loops of translation: Responding to Douglas Robinson

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ABSTRACT

This paper responds to criticism of some of my work by Douglas Robinson. After pointing out some factual problems in his response, I agree with Robinson that my 2014 views on agency and complexity can be expanded, and show how I have done so since then. I then engage with the kind of hermeneutics Robinson uses in his response to my work, arguing that it is a contextless, affect-driven hermeneutics that bases too much of its argument on matters of identity. I try to explain what I find problematic with constructivist arguments, and to offer a complexity approach that overcomes the binary between idealism and realism. I also question Robinson's claim that he needs to 'correct' me where I am 'wrong', relating this strange loop in his hermeneutics to his own epistemological stance.

Keywords: idealism, realism, constructivism, hermeneutics, semiotics

Nenavadne zanke prevajanja: odgovor Douglasu Robinsonu

IZVLEČEK

Prispevek je odgovor na kritični odziv Douglasa Robinsona na nekatera moja dela. V prispevku najprej opozorim na določene probleme v zvezi z dejstvi, ki jih navaja Robinson, hkrati pa izrazim strinjanje z Robinsonovim mnenjem, da je mogoče moje poglede na delovalnost in kompleksnost iz leta 2014 razširiti, in pokažem, kako sem to tudi že storil. Nato se odzovem na hermenevtiko, ki jo Robinson ponudi kot alternativo mojemu razmišljanju, pri čemer izrazim mnenje, da gre za brezkontekstno hermenevtiko, ki jo usmerjajo čustva in ki temelji na identitetnih sodbah. Razložiti poskušam, kaj se mi zdi problematično pri konstruktivističnih argumentih, in ponuditi kompleksnostni pristop, ki presega binarnost med idealizmom in realizmom. Prav tako poudarim, da Robinsonovo prepričanje, da me mora »popraviti«, kjer se »motim«, razkriva nenavadno zanko v njegovi hermenevtiki, ki spodbija njegovo lastno epistemiološko stališče.

Ključne besede: idealizem, realizem, konstruktivizem, hermenevtika, semiotika

1.   Introduction

I think there can be little disagreement about Douglas Robinson being one of the most influential translation studies scholars alive. His work on hermeneutics and

neuroscience in translation started when it was not fashionable, and assisted the field in moving forward in many ways, not least in understanding how translation is always a semiotic activity that is related to the translator as an embodied, interpreting agent. His work on icosis tries to explain how the process of interpretation that occurs in an individual spreads through a community, adding a social dimension to his explanation. That a scholar of his calibre would take the time and effort to publish two chapters about my work in one year, quite similar in content but different in tone, is something I take as a compliment (Robinson 2022a; 2022b),[1] even though it took him eight years to respond to the 2014 publication *Translation theory and development studies: A complexity theory approach*,[2] and even though he ignores a number of relevant publications I have produced since. As expected, Robinson is mostly critical of my work, especially in *Strange loops*, but this kind of criticism can only be welcomed for advancing the agenda of translation studies. Following the opportunity to publish my reply to his article in *Stridon*, I decided to engage with Robinson. As it is impossible to respond to every point he raises, I would like to respond in three ways to Robinson's two papers on my work. First, I need to point out some factual problems in Strange loops. Next, I focus on points where I would agree with Robinson and use his criticism to clarify my own position. Finally, I spend some time pointing out what I find problematic in Robinson's hermeneutics and his criticism of my work.

2.   Factual problems

On page 1 of *Strange loops*, Robinson claims that Hofstadter's work on complexity thinking has had no takers in translation studies. He then proceeds to review my work in which Hofstadter has been quoted at least 12 times without once acknowledging my engagement with Hofstadter's work. A second factual problem is that Robinson claims that I have been born in the Western Cape Province of South Africa while I was, in fact, born in what is now the Eastern Cape Province, more than 600km northeast of Ladismith, to which Robinson refers in chapter four. When I was born, the current Western, Eastern and Northern Cape were one province, the Cape Province. Lastly, Robinson refers to me as an Afrikaner. He never acknowledges the introduction to *Translation theory* where I devote pages 2 and 3 to my positionality and where I self-identify as a 'Euro-African' or an 'Afrikaans-speaking South African'. On page 3, I refer to the group into which I was born as Afrikaners, as they are commonly known throughout the world, but I have never identified as an Afrikaner. Robinson seems to

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1   For the sake of convenience, I use *Strange loops* and *Translation as icosis* to refer to these two works by Robinson.

2   For the sake of convenience, I refer to this work as *Translation theory*.

be unaware that, in the South Africa about which he writes, there is not one 'Afrikaner identity' (see for instance Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert's *Afrikaner – Afrikaan* (1999)). I therefore take offence at being assigned an identity that I did not choose. Moreover, basing scholarly arguments on identity is a point to which I return in the last part of my response.

3.   Working towards a better understanding of agency

As a second category of responses, I would like to discuss points on which I agree with Robinson and then perhaps clarify some of my own arguments. I think Robinson is right in that my theory of agency in *Translation theory* is quite limited, although I think his hermeneutics is problematic in that he discusses this book and then mostly only two pages of it to the exclusion of all the work I have done since (Marais 2017; 2019a; 2020). That said, *Translation theory* was indeed mainly focussed on systems thinking, and in particular, it lacked a deeper semiotic understanding of agency in translation. That is why I immediately started working on the 2019 monograph to explain translation from a semiotic perspective, a work that Robinson (2019) reviewed but ignored in the two works under discussion. What Robinson seems to miss is that my intention with *Translation theory* was not a theory of agency, although that seems to be Robinson's only interest as he admits on page 123 of *Translation as icosis*. In *Translation theory* , I tried to introduce complexity thinking as a useful epistemological tool in translation studies, and I tried to take the postcolonial debate further by positing problems in the Global South not as problems only related to colonisation, but also to the current context in which communities have to adapt to events that they cannot control, like the war in the Ukraine, hence the need for development studies (Marais and Delgado Luchner 2018). Now clearly, Robinson's own ideas about the icotic process represent a much more developed understanding of agency in translation studies, and for the most part of it, I agree with him, which is why I continued working on agency (Marais 2018; 2019c; 2020; 2021; forthcoming; Marais and Meylaerts 2019; 2022). Mirror neurons should, in my view, indeed be included in this explanation, and it seems fair to argue that embodied cognition spreads through a community based on the work done by mirror neurons and communicative practices based on the work of mirror neurons. Where Robinson's anthropocentric hermeneutics is still limited is at the level of ecology. His theory cannot explain the translation processes throughout the tradosphere (Cronin 2017) or the bio-semiosphere (Kull 2015; Lotman 2019). In a monograph that is currently under review (Marais, forthcoming), I developed Robinson's theory further to include the semiotic agency of non-humans, as well as to explain in much more detail how the human body, among others, is a

system of integrated systems adapted to turning ideas into material artefacts. I based this development on Sharov and Tønneson's (2021) impressive monograph *Semiotic agency*. In the forthcoming monograph I suggest two 'movements' to help explain the relationship between matter and ideas, and hence semiotic agency. First I explain, following Deacon (2013), how mind emerged from matter, and then I try to explain how mind, once emerged, comes to exercise downward causation on matter. This can only be explained if one is able to demonstrate how brain and mind are related, *contra* Robinson's declarations on pages 120–21 of *Translation as icosis*, and how both are integrated in a living organism with nervous systems, muscular systems and skeletal systems, among others, in other words, much more than mirror neurons only.

I also agree with Robinson that I could have made my use of complexity thinking clearer – and less dependent on the natural sciences version thereof, which is why I had since co-edited two volumes (Marais 2019b; Marais and Meylaerts 2019; 2022) that Robinson also chose to ignore. It seems that Robinson misunderstood my intentions with regard to complexity thinking, and if he could do so, then other people might too. To clarify, my intention was not to posit complexity in a binary relationship to anything else. Rather, I contend that a careful reading of the whole of the 2014 book will show that I proposed complexity thinking as a meta-theoretical approach that could straddle all kinds of binaries. Often referring to Hofstadter, I used terms like meta-stance, meta-theoretical, meta-meta-theory, meta-epistemology, meta-disciplinary, meta-questions, meta-conceptual and meta-ideologies in a profusion of conceptualisations, all of which Robinson ignored because, as he states clearly on page 160 of *Strange loops*, pages 143–45 are the most significant part of *Translation theory*. In the argument I made in the 2014 book, complexity thinking is therefore not a binary to anything. It is a meta-theoretical perspective from which one could integrate contesting approaches, including epistemologies. The idea is that complexity thinking takes a meta-theoretical stance in which one tries to explain why traditional binaries, e.g. both universalism and particularism or both process and substance or both agent and system, are required to explain reality and the phenomena we study. This line of thought should become clear when one reads original complexity thinkers like Morin (2008) or Cilliers (1998).

In addition, I would like to mention something on which Robinson did not comment. If I had to rework the 2014 volume now, I would remove most of the figures that I had in chapter 3 because I do not think they are correct. For instance, having the semiotic and the biological as two separate spheres of reality has been refuted in biosemiotics (Favareau 2007; Kull 2007). In addition, the seemingly clear distinction, suggested by the figures, between the psychological (the term should probably have been cognitive) and semiotic is problematic. Also, I would relativise the inter-ing argument I made

back then by saying that all of semiosis is work that is done in relating two systems (Lotman 2019, CP 4.127). At any rate, I never see my thinking as final, and I shall probably once again change my mind in the future on various things.

A last point on which I would agree with Robinson is that I could have better clarified my views on constructivism and critical theory. However, a detailed analysis of the problems with these sets of ideas was not my intention. A detailed discussion of these topics would have detracted from my arguments about studying translation in developing contexts. That said, it is exactly in his application of constructivism and critical theory in his response to my work that Robinson provides justification for my criticism, a point to which I now turn in the next section.

4.   The stranger loops in an affect-hermeneutics

As a first point, it is clear from the tone and choice of words that Robinson interpreted what I intended as an engagement with some of the underlying assumptions in translation studies as an attack on those assumptions. For instance, I "just attack, eyes squinted shut" (*Strange loops*, 162), I launch a "snide attack" (*Strange loops,* 163) or a "savage attack" (*Strange loops*, 164), I "take potshots" (*Translation as icosis*, 98) and "a jab" (*Translation as icosis*, 113). Robinson's interpretation demonstrates some of the problems with his affect-driven hermeneutics. My interpretation of his interpretation of my work is that something in it – or me, because he gets quite personal – triggered a feeling of being under attack. He seemingly never questions that feeling, but rather uses his considerable intellect to justify his feeling and then attack my identity as part of his defence. Yes, I did indeed express some criticism of Western scholarship, but so have Susam-Sarajeva (2002), Tymoczko (2007), Bandia (2008) and just about every postcolonial translation studies scholar. It is not clear why Robinson would find criticism against central ideas in Western scholarship "an attack", to the point that he needs to become personal in its defence. The only answer I can find, which might be entirely wrong, lies in Robinson's affect hermeneutics. He responded to something that he felt when reading my book rather than to an argument. In explaining his hermeneutics, he sometimes uses the term "affect-becoming-conative" and sometimes "affect-becoming-cognitive", which seems to indicate that he is not sure or not serious about rationality in scholarship. For instance, on page 105 in *Translation as icosis*, he uses "kinesthetic-becoming-affective-becoming-conative(-becoming-cognitive)". Why is the "becoming-cognitive" bracketed out? On pages 110, 113, 115 and 124 the "becoming-cognitive" is not included at all. Now, in 2022, I think that we all know that rationality is bounded, limited, relative, etc. However, does that mean that we stop trying to make rational arguments in scholarship? Has scholarship now devolved

to moral judgements of our opponents' identity? In my view, endlessly restating the relativity of knowledge does not help us. Endlessly restating that knowledge is constructed equally does not help us. We need to work past this to find a way to explain how we are able to build technology, societies and cultures based on and despite this relative, limited knowledge (Barad 2007).

This brings me to a second point of criticism against Robinson's hermeneutics. In the way that he uses it against my work, it seems to be a contextless hermeneutics. First, he decides, without motivation, that the most important part of the book is the section on translation and development on pages 143–45. He seems to ignore the introduction in which I clearly hedged my views and positionality. He seems to ignore most of chapters two and three and he dismisses chapters five to seven as descriptive work. Robinson thus ignores the context I provided, namely that I am writing about translation studies in Africa and that I base my reservations about critical studies on my interpretation that translation practices in Africa have not yet been adequately described on their own terms – rather than in terms of conceptualisations that have been constructed elsewhere, which is, by the way, a common argument in the decolonisation of the mind debate. In other words, he does not seem to consider the context in which pages 143–45 appear. Secondly, it appears that he does not consider the context of my other writings, some of which he reviewed (Robinson 2019) and in which I worked out in more detail various aspects of what he criticises in the 2014 volume. In *Translation as icosis* he writes about negentropy without a single reference to my 2019 book in which I worked out, in some detail, the negentropic aspects of translation (Marais 2019a, 158–77). The context of my work is a developing context. As indicated above, my argument was that these contexts, generally speaking and in Africa in particular, have been subject to limited description of the translational practices of the people living in those places. My argument has not been against critical thinking as a whole, but against the way in which it pertains to translation studies in developing contexts. My argument was that I think we first need to understand the context before we can criticise it. Whether right or wrong, there is a solid reason for my questions about a critical approach to translation studies in developing contexts. I often find that criticism in African contexts is justified based on values that have been determined in places other than the one to which they apply. For instance, at conferences in Africa, it is often argued that professionalisation is the answer to the invisibility of the translator, and this is done based on a critical theory analysis of the situation. However, this analysis never asks about the context, such as the fact that, in Europe, there is money to pay translators professional rates because many West-European nations had the advantage, among others, of having colonies and building their riches on the suffering of others. African governments do not have that luxury, and

repeating the same critical argument will not change this. Rather, what translation studies scholars in Africa need to do, in my view, is to understand why things are the way they are, along with the constraints under which they emerged, and only then can critical-theory apparatus become useful to ask issues about construction and power. Again, I might be wrong in my assessment, but I do not view it as an attack on critical theory. My intention is an engagement with the relevance of critical theory for translation studies in a particular context.

Robinson also expressed some criticism of my views on constructivism, which he claims I fabricated based on a lack of knowledge ("projected out of fairly widespread ignorance onto social constructivism" (*Strange loops*, 158), "it's a fantasy" (*Strange loops*, 162)). Apart from Robinson's own problematic views of constructivism, which I discuss below, one quick quote from Vidal Claramonte should suffice to prove that at least some translation studies scholars think in a way that I find problematic:

> If we start with the idea that the Real does not exist, that what exists is its construct through language we can see that we build our reality with the words we choose [...]. The Real does not exist, only interpretations of the Real, translations which turn it into linguistic, pictorial or musical texts. But they are always translations. [...] Let us start from the premise that it is not reality that creates language but the opposite: the real in itself does not exist, the real is that which reaches us after it has been re-presented through a series of signs. We might think of a new concept of translation based on the idea that because language constructs reality the "original" text is already a translation. (Vidal Claramonte 2019, 221)

Note that here the Real does not exist, which is a pure idealist position.

Now, the problem is not that Robinson is critical of my views on this topic. Rather, the problem is that he does not seem to be able to fathom that anyone might in any way question constructivism. In his hermeneutics, he seems to have constructed constructivism to be some kind of religion that no one dares question. My point about constructivism is not that it is wrong, but that it is, from a complexity perspective, one-sided, reducing reality to human knowledge of that reality. When we deal with creating knowledge, I think we are dealing with a relational activity. Knowledge is constructed, no doubt about this in my mind, but in relation to a reality that does not always yield to our constructive intentions. This is the second, or brute reality, in Peircean thought (CP 1.24, 5.473 and 6.202, for instance). It is the object that objects to our interpretation, in actor-network theory (Callon et al. 2011, 57). It is the thing in relation to which we construct semiotic objects in Deely's thought (Deely 2009). It is the "certain empiricism" that Pym (2016)

yearns for in translation studies. And it is the platypus that no-one has ever experienced that needs to be translated, through several iterations, in Eco's thought (1997). Consequently, knowledge is clearly constructed by us, but at least some parts of reality are not. And this is where I would differ from Robinson's version of constructivism. Robinson claims in many places that reality is constructed (*Strange loops*, 158–9) and that I cannot imagine that reality is socially constructed. My view would indeed be that knowledge about reality, but not all of reality itself, is constructed socially. To formulate it more clearly, all knowledge is constructed but some of reality is not constructed. We did not construct the Earth or any of the thousands of species of wild animals around us, or light or rain or oxygen. Certainly, we did construct our cultures and societies, and they did become reality as part of our reality, and just as certainly, our knowledge of them is constructed. In addition, we did construct new species of farm animals and plants and bridges and many other things. However, none of this implies logically that all of reality is constructed. Perhaps what we need to do here is to specify what we mean by reality. If we mean social-cultural reality, then reality is clearly constructed, but I am not talking about social-cultural reality only. I am talking about all of reality. We were born into a reality that existed long before we came and which produced and constructed us, and to reduce that reality to our construction of it is perhaps one of the things that brought us to the current ecological crisis.

In my view, therefore, we construct knowledge in relation to, in response to (Marais 2017; Petrilli and Zanoletti, forthcoming), reality. This does not mean that we have unmediated knowledge of reality, but that human cognition is structured in such a way that we can know things, reliably enough to survive, apart from what they mean in our *Umwelt* (Deely 2009). A simple example should suffice. Imagine boarding a plane and the pilot informs you in a calm voice that this plane was built on a knowledge base that is relative, uncertain and undetermined, that has no bearing on the laws of physics and that it might or might not bring you home safely, but it does not really matter because all knowledge is relative anyway. My simple point is that the idealist bias in constructivism means that it brackets out parts of reality (see also Maran's 2020 criticism of symbolicism). In *Translation as icosis,* Robinson denies that semiosis is rooted in the brain. I quote: "No, 'semiotics' is not 'rooted' in the brain. It is not rooted anywhere. It is not 'part' of anything" (*Translation as icosis*, 120). In addition, he argues that "[s]emiosis is not a reality structure but a reality-structuring activity" (*Translation as icosis*, 121). If semiosis is performed by biological organisms, which I would regard as part of reality, how would semiosis not be both a reality structure and a reality-structuring activity? I am not sure how Robinson defends this point, seeing that his semiotic theory of icosis is based on mirror neurons in the brain, but I suspect that it is his idealism/constructivism that takes over here. To my mind, Robinson's

theory of mirror-neuron icosis is therefore a solipsistic theory. He assumes that what is relevant is already in the brain, and gets mirrored to other brains. But how does any information come into the brain or how does the brain influence the matter around it? To put it differently, how do you explain an open relationship among the mind, body and environment? This anti-biology stance is what I find problematic in Robinson's version of constructivism. It is also what I find problematic in feminist calls for, for instance, debiologising the hymen (Ergun 2018). Robinson brands me a chauvinist for daring to express criticism of feminism, and the only reason that he can imagine for my criticism is that it is a threat to my chauvinist privilege. The problem with Robinson's explaining away my arguments as related to my identity is that I cannot defend myself because then it seems that "the lady doth protest too much" (pun intended). The only thing that I can do is to restate my position: I think constructivism in various guises continues the Cartesian divide between mind and matter by reducing human interaction with matter to interaction in the mind only. In my view, we do not need to de-biologise any part of our biology because that is what reality gave us. We need to interpret the meanings that we attach to biological signs and critically, yes critically, deal with those interpretations. To refer back to the example above, the hymen is not guilty of anything, so why should it be debiologised? It is men who interpreted the hymen as a value within a system of values that benefits them. Interpretations of biology need to be changed, not biology.

My further point was that the, in my view, overoptimistic view of the human ability to construct and control reality is linked to Western thought, most notably the Greek-Roman tradition and its corollaries in the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). I might be wrong, but I do not see a similar strong focus on control and agency in African traditional religions, in animism or in Buddhism or Hinduism. Moreover, the binary that Robinson concludes from this argument is not my intention nor does it follow logically from my position. The logical implication of a critique of Western thought is not that all other traditions are innocent. I am responding to a historical situation in which thought in African contexts has been shaped by the dominating colonial forces, and my response is aligned with Fanon's (1963) and other postcolonial authors' views on decolonising the mind.

I now move to a number of detailed criticisms that Robinson directed against my work. First, he takes offence of me talking about the "typical, anonymous, voiceless, invisible translator slaving away in a stuffy little office, translating boring municipal regulation after regulation", which he sees as a "savage attack" and "an aggressively explicit attack" (*Strange loops*, 164). I must say, I am taken aback by this interpretation as my intention was the exact opposite. Robinson wants to know where I get this idea,

and he sees it as offensive to any translator. Well, since Venuti's (1995) work in the 1990s, the invisibility of the translator has been a significant point of debate in translation studies. The sociological approach to translation studies have problematised work satisfaction among translators, as can be seen in a Google Scholar search for "job satisfaction in translation", and institutions like FIT and SATI (in South Africa) have worked tirelessly to create better working conditions for translators. In addition, I have worked full-time as a freelance translator, editor, transcriber for five years, and about ten more years in a part-time capacity, and I had the experience of "slaving away" on many occasions. Furthermore, I am an accredited member of SATI, I was a member of their training committee for three years, and I have attended many of their conferences in which these issues are discussed. Lastly, I have translator friends who told me that they would, proverbially, cut their wrists if they had to edit or translate another text of a certain type. It seems that, in Robinson's constructed version of reality, all translators are heroes that translate for the thrill it provides, though not Western-type heroes. Of course, upon reflection, I could have used the word "proverbial" rather than "typical", but that would have changed very little in my argument. What Robinson grudgingly acknowledges, but only after his vicious attack on my personal identity, is that I am saying that this proverbial invisible translator contributes "as much if not more" to the construction of society. In other words, translation studies tend to study high-level translators (Milton and Bandia 2009) and how they are agents, but I have seen very few studies that consider the 'real' invisible translator, and not to speak of the translator in the informal economy, as an agent of national development. My argument, in fact, is set up to argue exactly the opposite of what Robinson interprets it to be. In fact, if read together with the chapter on translation in the informal economy (*Translation theory*, chap. 7), I am exactly trying to find a way to acknowledge the crucial work translators are doing without resorting to theories of activism (Tymoczko 2007; 2010) to explain them (Marais 2019c).

Robinson also attacks me for claiming that the weather is beyond our control. The interesting point is the strange loops in his counterargument. First, he says, "Ask the shaman" (*Strange loops,* 167). Now, I do agree that there are multiple worldviews that aim at explaining reality, and that one worldview cannot be said to offer a better explanation than another – it all depends on what you want to explain. That said, the question is what shamans mean by 'control' of the weather. Given the incompatibility among worldviews, the question is also whether shamans could prove me wrong, and if so, on what basis? In other words, Robinson sets up incommensurable worldviews against one another and naively suggests that the shaman's worldview is truer than mine. Moreover, I think that Robinson's attempt to counter a scholarly argument with a spiritual/religious one is problematic. In this, I am probably a child of Western

thought that argues that, in scholarly debates, we need to bracket out spiritual/religious arguments because they are unfalsifiable and, most importantly, they do not help us to explain the things we want to explain in such a paradigm (see Deacon's (2013, chap. 2 and 3) detailed arguments against homunculi and golems in scholarly thought). Second, in his efforts to counter my argument, Robinson refers to a South African novel that operates on the assumptions of animism. So, Robinson's argument goes, ask people from traditional religions if you want real answers. Would Robinson be willing to do this by asking traditional, conservative Christians, Jews and Muslims about feminism – and abide by their judgement? At the same time, Robinson argues that we should not read scientific texts if we want answers to our questions about reality. Rather, we should read fictional texts as they will clarify things for us. Imagine a conference on psychology and, in a panel on parapsychology, someone asks if ghosts really exist. If his response to my work is anything to go by, Robinson would respond with "Of course they do, just watch the Harry Potter movies!" I think we need much more nuance in this very complex debate about competing worldviews.

I think Robinson's response to my work raises another serious question in scholarship more broadly, but also in translation studies in particular. In my view, Robinson's response in Strange loops constitutes an identity-driven critique. His section on my work contains the following references to my identity: South African (once on page 158), African (twice on page 160), male (thrice on pages 159–60, 164), white (four times on pages 159–60, 163–4), Afrikaner (four times on pages 163, 166–8) and farm-boy (once on page 167). This gives a total of 15 references to identity in about ten pages that he spends criticising my work. I compared this with his discussion of Henri Meshonic's work just before mine: no reference to continent, gender or race, and only one reference to French but then not in relation to Meshonic but to Bible translation. How does one make sense of these references to my identity – most of them using negative rhetoric? Frankly, I do not know. On the one hand, I can attribute it to Robinson's affect-driven hermeneutics. Some of what I said or did irritated him so much that he felt that he had to resort to a personal attack, by which I mean an attack on my identity. On the other hand, Robinson seems to stray dangerously close to the kind of "grievance studies rhetoric" that continues to be the topic of debate in scholarly circles.[3] He tries to negate my arguments by putting me in categories of identity that are detested and under all kinds of suspicion: male, white, Afrikaner. Casting suspicions on my identity does a lot of semiotic work to relativise my argument. In addition, he reads me in a binary way. If I have a question about constructivism, I am a positivist. If I have a question about feminism, I am a chauvinist. If I have a question about Western

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3   A Google search for 'Grievance studies affair' will deliver many varied perspectives on this event.

scholarship, I am an arrogant member of the empire who must have something wrong with me, namely that I am white and male. If I use the term "probability", it can only be with mathematical intentions (*Translation as icosis*, 106). By the way, in my latest work, I use the term "propensity" (Marais, forthcoming) as I think Robinson's suggested plausibility creates more problems than it solves. For instance, it is not able to deal with something like fake news, because in a particular context a certain item of fake news is plausible. How would one then criticise such news as fake? I think that the way in which Robinson goes about his criticism of my work justifies my questions about critical theory and constructivism. How does constructing me as evil or at least wrong based on the colour of my skin or my combination of chromosomes take forward the debate in translation studies? Maybe Robinson is right in that constructivists are not guilty of all of the things that I attribute to them, but Robinson as a spokesperson for constructivists does indeed seems to be guilty of quite a few of them.

Back to identity. We know by now that identity plays a role in what we observe and how we think. We also know that identity is a very complex issue with many layers of being crammed into one person. And of course, we may need to find ways to question one another's stances as they relate to our identities. However, I am not sure that the kind of attack Robinson launched in *Strange loops* is constructive in any way. If I had to respond in kind, I would reject all of Robinson's hermeneutics for being centred in the white, male-dominated colonisation project of the Anglo-American (Western) world. Clearly, such a rebuttal would get us nowhere. I am racking my brain for a way out of this problem, and cannot clearly see one, except that constructivism needs a dose of realism. It needs to take the Other seriously and not demean it. At the very least, discussion of these thorny topics needs to be accompanied by some respect.

Probably the strangest loop in the whole debate is Robinson's insistence in the *Translation as icosis* paper that I am "wrong" (page 103), albeit just a little, and that he needs to "correct" me (pages 103–4). In addition, like the child from Africa that I am, I "could use some help" (page 101) – this from a coloniser who knows better. Robinson does not treat me like an equal but like a child who needs the guidance of a father. The argument is strange because Robinson has spent his whole academic career in arguing, in my reading, from a postmodernist perspective that meanings are only determined by interpretation and that these interpretations are always relative, preliminary and undetermined – a position with which I agree, by the way. In academia, there is no final interpretant. What does it require of him to decide that I am wrong and that he can correct me? Well, at the very least it means that he needs to know the truth, which he has spent his whole life denying. How else would he know I am wrong? For Robinson, the difference between us is not to be explained semiotically as a difference in interpretation. Rather, it is explained

epistemologically, namely that he knows the truth and I do not. It seems that with this argument, Robinson has completed a strange loop and returned to the positivist beginnings, which we are all, in translation studies at least, trying to avoid. There could, however, also be a different explanation, as with all interpretations. It could be that Robinson is still the postmodernist he had set out to be, but that when dealing with people from the colonies he simply takes a stronger political stand. After all, you are the empire and they are the colony, so you need to take them by the hand and show them what is correct. In other words, what drives Robinson here is not epistemology but politics, based on his belief that I am in some way an uninformed threat to the (his?) empire.

5.   Conclusion

Robinson's critique of my work and my response to him in this paper are pretty much par for the course in scholarly engagement. That said, I am left with a sense that much of this debate is not taking us forward in any way. While I am not willing to go as far as Pym to claim that I am 'ashamed' to be in the same discipline as anybody, a debate on the level of identity leaves me in a solipsistic existential crisis. Robinson has constructed me, I have responded, and we are each still very safe in our own little corners of the world. He has called me names and attributed an unwanted identity to me, so how do I respond without using the same tactics, which would leave us in a vicious and childish cycle of name-calling? On the one hand, that seems to be the nature of the human condition, and nothing can be done about it. On the other hand, should we stop hoping for a real Bakhtinian dialogue in which we listen as much as we talk? That said, it is difficult for me to hear anyone when they call me names. I am not sure that I know how to overcome this problem, but I do hope that this debate between the two of us will foster further debate in the field about the nature of our engagement with each other.

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