

The Passion to Criticize and the Swine of Gadara

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On the ABC Radio news today: “Six senior staff members of the Greens resign including the former chief of staff.” Most listeners would not have stopped for a moment to check the validity of this statement, which is purporting that the former chief of staff was among the six staff members who resigned. However, when the chief of staff resigned he had not become former yet. While this may be discerned from the shared knowledge or inter-subjectivity that exists between speaker and listener, for most listeners the discrepancy does not register. The information is readily accepted unchallenged and incorporated into the listener’s knowledge base to be called upon later when making decisions and forming relevant views and attitudes. In this case, the speaker lacked due diligence and the listeners due vigilance and the editor did not do what they are expected to do in a *modus operandi* that can be described as the herd mentality or the Swine of Gadara Fallacy.

The passion to change someone else’s draft, as observed by the English science fiction writer H. G. Wells (1866 – 1946), has become a mantra for those who find themselves at the receiving end of editorial intervention and interference and a way for them to understand and rationalize this phenomenon. The tendency to meddle in someone else’s intellectual work seems to extend beyond editorial tasks to academic and non-academic work, and there are those in this area of human endeavour who feel they have to say something negative about work they review—be it a book, a research paper or an article— The Captain Negatives of the day. Inexperience, lack of exposure and naiveté seem to be the hallmark of these critics. Irresponsible negative criticisms, which are in most cases driven by the need to accrue academic credit points, in backward academic systems, would normally be ignored by the author of the published work despite their potentially damaging effect on the work reviewed and to some extent the reputation and standing of the author. To rationalize the irrational may find justification in the fact that criticism can be viewed as a form of censorship, which should not be tolerated at any rate. To criticize, especially without justification, is to excise, suppress and limit distribution, much to the consternation of those who believe otherwise. A good book that receives a bad review is less likely to sell well—unless it is a bad book surrounded by some controversy and hullabaloo that serves a particular political end, such as *The Satanic Verses*. In this case, a bad review attracts puerile ideological solidarity on the part of the powers that be and the elite of society gelling together to defend their system of worthless and deluded values.

In peer reviews, censorship is a real concern as some of these reviews try to suppress work that is deemed controversial or disagreeable. Even quotations of work are subject to the abuse and bias of censorship and misrepresentation.

Words such as “claims”, “suggests”, “argues”, and “contends” may be used to misrepresent what the author has said and belittle and obscure their work. A case in point is a recent article in which I was quoted, and in which the authors described my *original seminal* work as “compiled” by me.¹ Language is indeed a powerful tool; in the wrong hands, it can be manipulated easily for specific ends and in careless, shoddy hands, it can cause irreparable damage.

This brings us to the point of this article and my response to Alinne Fernandes’ review of my book *Optimality in Translation*, which appeared in *The Journal of Specialised Translation* (Issue 16 – July 2011). After a brief survey of the book’s chapters, Fernandes, a doctoral student at the time of the review, makes two succinct slap-on criticisms of the book in the last paragraph of her review. The first one runs like so: “Even though the author very clearly sets out his research problem and how he plans to reach his objectives, he over-extends his theoretical discussion on concepts and terminology that prove to distract the reader from the main objective of the book.” This criticism can be rebutted on the grounds that the reviewer is not all the readers; she did not survey even one other reader beside herself. Consequently, she cannot speak on behalf of all readers and she has no way of knowing what other readers would think of the book. To the uninitiated however, such criticism may go unchallenged—making it all the more necessary to call it out for what it is in this rebuttal.

We teach our students to think logically and support their views and opinions with evidence based on facts and not suppositions and conjecture and to be able to detect logical fallacies. Keen intellect demands keen analysis of what people throw around in order to maintain the integrity of information and knowledge received and exchanged. Consider the following scenario presented “as an ice-breaker” by a new manager to his staff at a weekly meeting: “You are stranded on a desert island. What two items would you take with you?” Most if not all the unsuspecting staff members answered this hypothetical question by listing the items they would take with them (a Swiss knife and pair of boots, food and a blanket, etc), without questioning the wrong premise of the question—that is people don’t get stranded by choice. Hence they are unable to pick and choose items to take with them to a desert island. The definition of stranded is: (1) to be driven or run ashore or aground; (2) to be brought into or left in a difficult or helpless position). Getting stranded is not a planned activity or event and finding oneself on a desert island is not a getaway vacation.

It is this kind of rash generalization and fallacious arguments that those in academia are supposed to caution students and budding writers to avoid? Yet our reviewer and her editor were both oblivious of this basic principle of good writing and fallacy-free thinking. In addition, it is customary when introducing new concepts to use new terminologies to describe them, especially when the established terminologies are inadequate for such descriptions. Innovation requires invention of new ways of applying knowledge and new terminologies to describe new knowledge. In this instance, the book tackles decision making in

translation under constraints and the notion of optimality—two concepts that had not been addressed in Translation Studies before this work. Therefore, new terminologies were needed to describe them and to break away from stale and worn-out linguistically oriented indoctrinations imposed by those who came before. For example, one such indoctrinated reviewer of the work when it was still a doctoral thesis rejected the use of “cloned sentence”, preferring her own inadequate brainwashed term (gloss) to “cloned”. Besides, what is good for the goose is good for the gander and if other writers, researchers and authors could do it, one would hope for the sake of clear communication, that there should be no harm or prejudice in using new terminologies to do the same, granted they are defined clearly and applied consistently throughout. This latter point is probably more critical to the work than the criticism of using new terms to describe the work. New ideas, new inventions and creations have always necessitated new terms to describe them.

Furthermore, in the second criticism she claims that the author “does not explore his results as deeply as he explores the literature review of theories related to decision-making process”, without producing a shred of supporting evidence. Given her rash generalization about the readers, how can we take her second criticism seriously? Striking a balance between the various chapters of the book is a function of information design that takes into consideration aspects of usability and relevance within the confines and limitations of the book and her comment that the results were not explored “as deeply” suffers from relativity and vagueness and overlooks the purpose of each chapter relative to the overall purpose of the book.

It is expected in the academic world, in particular, that those reviewing academic work should do so with a degree of rationality and logic. Sadly, this reviewer has exhibited neither. As the old American western proverb goes, “have things as having does”, and the Arabic counterpart, “give your bread to the baker even if he should eat half of it”. In other words, those who do not understand how to conduct a review should steer away from such a task that can be extremely damaging to the unsuspecting reader and serious author just for the sake of earning brownie points in a trite, rank and tribal academic world.

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Works Cited

Casadevall, A., & Fang, F. C. (2009). Is Peer Review Censorship? *Infection and Immunity*, 77 (4), 1273-1274 .

Darwish, A. (2008). *Optimality in Translation*. Melbourne: Writescope Publishers.

¹ A case in point is Michael, J. et al (2013), *Development of a Translation Standard to support the improvement of health literacy and provide consistent high-quality information*. Australian Health Review, 2013, 37, 547–551. In 1995, I introduced the concepts of information integrity, linguistic integrity and translation integrity into Translation Studies to describe my three-tier model of translation and Translation Quality Assurance system. I did not compile them from somewhere else. Yet the authors of this article use the word “compiled” to refer to this original work of mine.