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Translation : its Nature, Problems & Limitations

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TRANSLATION : ITS NATURE, PROBLEMS & LIMITATIONS

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[*This is the first of two articles on "Translation, Structure and Lexicography", which were originally read as a paper on comparative stylistics before the Linguistic Circle of Columbia University, New York (March 16, 1955). For several years the author was a translator of technical and commercial materials in New York City, primarily into English from various Germanic, Romance and Slavic languages. He is now Instructor in Modern Languages, Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn, and a lecturer in linguistics, Columbia University.*]

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It is popularly believed that every language has its own private mystique, which the foreigner can only penetrate — if at all — by steeping himself in the culture and idiom of its speakers. ... We should certainly do nothing, for the present, at least, to discourage this notion, since no small part of our enrollment in elective foreign language courses is due to it !

Privately, however, let us examine the adage "traduttore, traditore", and seek to evaluate it.

We must first examine the term "translation" — what does it mean ? ... It is of course distinct from interpreting, the direct oral mediation between the speakers of two languages. Translation always involves the written or printed language and may be subdivided into three main types : (1) *pragmatic* translation, (2) *literary* translation and (3) *ethnological/linguistic* translation. These types, to be sure, are not always sharply separable, and each has many subdivisions.

Pragmatic translation is the domain of the commercial translator : personal and business letters, legal documents and technical articles of innumerable types. In this type of translation, the emphasis is upon the transmission of content, and good form, though highly desirable, is secondary. One does not, in translating a Portuguese business letter, try to reproduce its ornate phraseology with an equivalent early-19th-century style of business English — the result would be disturbing. What the recipient wants to know is how many hogsheads of tobacco he should send, when, and under what terms; and he wants to know it in language he would use himself.

The same is true of technical materials : Scientists — with the rarest of exceptions — are notoriously bad stylists, in any language, and to do more than reproduce a text that is accurate and free of foreignisms is indeed Love's Labour Lost.

The type of translation I have called *literary,* on the other hand, calls for reproduction not only of the first order of meaning, but also of literary form, style, and mood.

Of the great Russian novelists it can be said that they are *truly* great — that their works can still be admirable and moving in the mutilated translations in which most of us know them. (You know what I mean : *golubushka* — which means no more than, say, "my dear" — appears literally as "my little dove", and so on).

The greatest challenge to combined erudition and ingenuity, of course, is the translation of poetry. Depending upon the original, and how far one is willing and able to go, one may reproduce not only the same meaningful series of images, but also metre and — hardest of all — rhyme ; and a few hardy souls attempt now and then to capture an alliteration of the original by a comparable alliteration in their own language.

Needless to say, translations of poetry which successfully take into account all these factors and are not, in the end, new poetic creations, are extremely rare : good translation requires latitude for the translator, which is precisely what verse form denies him ; and this is only the beginning of his woes, for he must also pass from one phonic scheme to another, and one accentual scheme to another, with minimum loss of effect — not to mention the translation of metaphors pleasing in one language and grotesque in another ; local allusions, and the contemporary allusions of a vanished culture ; and puns. As for poetry which deliberately subordinates form to the portrayal of subjective symbols, or, on the contrary, finds æsthetic delight and value in form itself — from the sonorous geometry of Arabic verse to the intellectually contrived preciosity and syntactic juggling of the skalds[1] — it can truly be said to defy translation, in any real sense of the term.

Excluding these extreme types, however, most poetry can be reasonably well rendered into another language in accordance with the general convention which accepts the retention of simply metre as adequate, with rhyme, if any, where it may be convenient. Add to this the technique which has become increasingly popular in the last two or three decades — that of printing the original on the left-hand page and the translation opposite it, so that with even an imperfect knowledge of the original language one can arrive, between the two, at much of the effect — and we have what is probably the happiest solution to the problem.[2]

In concluding the topic of literary translation, whether prose or peotry, one may venture the observation that, while there have been many

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[1] Example of a skaldic metaphor *(kenning)* : *branda elgr,* lit., "elk of beaks", means "ship", because, says Gordon *(Introduction to Old Norse,* introd., p.xli), of its projecting beaks, "resembling an elk roaming the seas".

[2] Noteworthy examples of this technique include, amongst many others : the Babette Deutsch translations of Rilke; the Dent edition of the Divine Comedy; and the New Directions Press *Anthology of Contemporary Latin-American Poetry.*

splendid achievements in this field, it is probable that, throughout history, mediocre translations have always predominated.[3]

The anthropologist's interest in translation is generally associated with codification of the cultures of so-called "indigenous" or "primitive" peoples. The best publicized — if not the most generally practiced — technique is the one known as multiple-stage translation (well described in the October 1954 issue of the *International Journal of American Linguistics*). Time, unfortunately, prevents my digressing to describe this interesting, and for many purposes profitable procedure. Suffice it to say that it begins with the tape-recording of the passage to be rendered, after which the anthropologist, with the indispensable aid of a bilingual informant, breaks the passage down into manipulable units and then, proceeding through various sharply defined stages, progressively modifies these units from a crude original to the refined finished product. His basic tenet throughout is complete empiricism of approach : at no time, ideally, does he leap over any of the stages, and at none of the stages does he indulge in subjective interpretations. Whether, of course, this is truly possible, or desirable, can be questioned; but there is no doubt that many valuable results have been achieved by this method. As an approach, of course, it is the polar opposite of that of the literary translator.

Returning to the pragmatic and literary types of translation, one important feature which commonly characterizes them is likely to be overlooked, and that is that they are rarely *translations* in the fullest possible sense, since — at least in the Western world — they are almost invariably made from one European language to another. One might almost better speak of a rendering — it is rare that the original language is truly foreign.

Thanks to centuries of cultural interrelations, the tremendous moulding force of ecclesiastical Latin (and in its own sphere, Greek), and to other factors, there is, in a sense, a *European language*. This European language transcends genetic relationships and includes not only the Indo-European majority but also such languages as Hungarian, Finnish and Estonian.

While not pausing to prove this contention, I may say, to illustrate what I mean in terms of an experience some of you have probably had, that any English-speaking person, for example, who has seriously studied an Oriental language is likely to end up feeling that French and German are simply variations on his own tongue.

It would also be easy, if I had time to do so, to substantiate this point with examples of locutions and other associational affinities within the sentence that are shared among the majority of European languages. I refer you, in this regard, to a recent article by Professor Peruzzi, of Rutgers University, (Word X, 1, April 1954), who traces the manifold

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[3] Nearly all that has been written about translation concerns literary translation only. Amongst books on the subject are : E. Stuart Bates, *Modern Translation*, London (1936), and K. I. Chukovski, *Iskusstvo Perevoda*, Moscow/Leningrad (1936). Noteworthy current articles include Jacques Barzun, "Food for the N.R.F.", *Partisan Review* 20 (1953), pp. 660-74, and Muna Lee. "Translating the Untranslatable", *Americas* (Engl. ed.) (Sept. 1954), p. 12 ff. The latter specifically concerns the translation of poetry.

recurrence of the phrase "to save appearances" (thus, sauver les apparences, salvar las apariencias, den Schein retten, et al.). One can similarly mention the saturation of a language such as German with loan translations from Latin (übersetzen, ausrufen, Beugung, umkehren — and thousands of others).

For that matter, Oriental languages, too, tend to fall into the patterns of European word formation and syntax in certain fields, such as technical language and the language of treaties and commercial relations, for which the West has provided the models. Normally, however, translations which cross the chasm between East and West, or between either of these and a so-called primitive language, truly involve translation in the real sense, and they can only be effectively accomplished with the aid of at least one intermediate stage.

In speaking of translations, so far, we have taken for granted that a "good" or "accurate" translation is possible. Assuming this to be so, what, then, are the criteria for measuring just how accurate a translation is ?

One test that has been applied experimentally has been to have another translator put the translation back into the original language. The discrepancies between the two versions in the original language make it possible to pinpoint many of the shortcomings in transmission — though one cannot always be sure which of the two translators was the guilty party.

The most practical test, of course, is the behavior response of the reader of the translation. If a chemical procedure is described, and he is blown through the ceiling, it is possible that the translator of the article was responsible.

A few years ago an Argentine concern which had ordered a piece of machinery was surprised when not one, but several of the units arrived. Investigation revealed that a translator in the downtown New York agency which had translated the original order had mistaken a singular for a plural. The agency was sued and forced to pay the cost of the round-trip shipment of all the items in excess of the one ordered; the translator, of course, was ignominiously discharged ...

Another type of inaccuracy is the deliberate one, which may occur in both bilateral and unilateral form. The former is most commonly met with in international agreements, as when "protection of minority rights" is perfectly understood by all parties to mean full scale military invasion of the territory concerned. This, of course, is wholly a matter of phraseology and only incidentally involves translation.

The unilateral type of conscious ambiguity has always had a place in the armory of tricks of colonial powers and generally involves a document the contents of which are transmitted orally — or even by signs — to the unfortunate *indigènes*. ... It is probable, for example, that the Indians who sold Manhattan for $24 didn't fully realize what they were doing, and that the Dutch did. It is not hard to imagine that the Dutch document which made this transaction official revolved about a word "cede" or "transfer" which to the Indians meant something like "make use of (their) tribal lands". The two parties to the agreement could scarcely have had the same notion of land tenure.

Apparently there have also been some cases of this sort involving mutual misunderstanding, too. This, at any rate, is the burden of a recent article in *Foreign Affairs* (Oct. 53, p. 85) concerning the Mau Mau movement in Kenya, which the writer attributes in part to the attempts of the Kikuyu, now swollen in numbers and hard pressed for land, to reclaim the lands they thought they had only leased to the settlers, in the traditional tribal manner of rotating land use. Here, too, of course, pivotal words could be found in the documents concerned; but the misunderstanding was a much broader one, involving mutual ignorance of the other's laws and folkways.

We have now examined the term "translation" and found that it has several distinct applications. The demands of a businessman, a reader of literature and an anthropologist will result, moreover, in different versions of the same original text (assuming, for convenience, that one of equal interest to all three could exist). We also find that there are *degrees* of translation, depending on the degree of cultural kinship of the speakers of the two languages concerned : the rendering of a French document into English and the rendering of the same document into Japanese may both be called translation, but qualitatively the processes are very different.

As to whether a translation can be accurate, this, of course, depends on the definition of accuracy. There is no doubt that it can be accurate for all practical purposes, and may even go far in reproducing the form, style and emotional atmosphere of the original. It cannot, however, be *exactly* the same in the sense that the language of the one text will evoke the same associational responses as the language of the other, corresponding text. For a translation must pass from the *expression* of one language through *content* and into the *expression* of another language; and since no two languages have exactly the same structure, so their expression of the same message inevitably differs, albeit this difference may be a minimum one.

In this sense, of course, one may legitimately question — as ancient philosophers did — whether the words of a language are capable of serving adequately as the vehicles of thought in the first place : unavoidably, so it has been argued, something of a thought is lost or distorted in its concretization as an utterance — that is, in its passage from content to expression. This much is certain : One cannot express oneself in any language without obeying the particular structural laws of that language. Even James Joyce, as long as he chose to write in English, was a prisoner of the structure into which his outpourings were channelized, with all its uniquely English strengths and weaknesses.[4]

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4 The bigliography given on page 86 could, of course, be greatly expanded. Among the many references which have come to the author's attention since his delivery of this paper should be mentioned the illuminating collection of essays issued in 1953 by the Institut de Traduction under the title : *Traductions, Mélanges offerts en mémoire de Georges Panneton* (J.-P. Vinay, ed.). BHS.