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SHARING RELEVANT FEATURES AN EXERCISE IN OPTIMAL TRANSLATING*

GIDEON TOURY

AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE
ON PURPOSE, METHOD, AND SOME BASIC NOTIONS

The official *raison d'être* for the publication of a scholarly article is usually that it has something *new* to offer, or that it contributes something to the understanding of a certain phenomenon, or domain of phenomena. So compelling is this requirement in the “publish or perish” atmosphere of our academic scene, that even the tritest of all papers flaunts “novelty appearances” when going out to the public.

In view of this, a word of warning is due: the present paper lays no claim to theoretical, methodological, or even descriptive novelty, nor is it offered as a contribution to any abstract “thing”. As suggested by its subtitle, there isn’t much more to it than an *exercise*, an exemplary exercise for the enjoyment and possible use of some “ones”, namely, those practicing translators, who wish to operate with a considerable amount of awareness of the problems involved in their trade and of the possible ways of (partly) solving these problems, and who, instead of (more often than not) normative “recipes” for their solution, stating what a translator *should* be doing, would for once like to have a systematic, step-by-step presentation of what a process of translational consideration and decision making *may* look like, under a certain specified set of conditions.

* * *

We propose to set out from an initial, gross distinction, namely, between “translatability” on the one hand, and “translating” and “translation(s)” on the other. According to this distinction, TRANSLATABILITY will be an a priori inter-lingual (or, better still, cross-lingual) *potential* — the (near-) interchangeability of messages in different languages and cultures, TRANSLATING

* I wish to thank the guinea pigs for this exercise, my students in the 1980-1981 “Introduction to Translation Studies” in the Department of Poetics and Comparative Literature, Tel Aviv University, for their extraordinary patience during its oral presentation. The preparation of this article for publication was furthered by an Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung research fellowship which the author has been granted.

is an *actual* cross-lingual process: a series of operations, performed by a man or a machine on an existing message, encoded in one language and belonging to one cultural tradition, and resulting in the establishment of *one* target text, the TRANSLATION. Every other target text, which is regarded as a translation in the target, recipient culture, is arrived at by a *different* series of operations which also forms an act of translating, though a different one.

The exercise which follows tries to reflect, as it were, a process of completely conscious OPTIMAL TRANSLATING (which, if realized, will yield an ADEQUATE TRANSLATION), with its three main phases:

- the decomposition of a source text;
- the replacement of the decomposed source text by elements of another language (and cultural tradition) under the condition of “optimal equivalence”;
- the [re]composition of a target language text.

EQUIVALENCE should be understood as the relatibility of an SL and a TL text or item to [at least some of] the same features (e.g. Catford, 1965: 50), whereas OPTIMAL EQUIVALENCE (or ADEQUACY) will be a sub-class of translational equivalence under the added requirement that the features that the SL and TL texts or items are relatable to be *relevant*.

The notion of FEATURE may be applied to any linguistic or textual element, of any scope, and at any rank. The same holds true for the possibility of relating to, or sharing “the same”, or (somewhat less categorically) “similar” features.

RELEVANCE, our addition to Catford’s original definition of translation equivalence, should be regarded as a *relative property* in at least two respects:

(1) it is always, if only by implication, an abbreviation for “relevant for something”, or “from a certain point of view”, which have to be specified if the notion of relevancy is to have any real significance;

(2) since, by definition, a text is a hierarchical organization of a great number of features, on various levels, the opposition of “relevant” vs. “irrelevant” should be conceived of as *polar*, rather than binary, so that one should always speak in terms of HIERARCHIES OF RELEVANCY, and not of any absolute one. Moreover, these hierarchies are *dynamic* in nature: any feature, at any level whatever, may — in principle, at least — assume, under certain textual circumstances, a high, on occasion even the highest position in such a hierarchy¹.

As regards the optimal translation equivalence, that relevance which we are after is, of course, *the relevance of the shared features*. However, since relevancy for the source text does not necessarily imply relevancy for the target text, or vice versa, even when the features in question are in fact shared by both texts (in which case there are differences in the hierarchical organization of their relevancy), it should be added that, when “optimal”

1. Cf., e.g., a detailed analysis of a concrete poem by Eugen Gomringer (“WIND”), where the ad hoc textual predominance of a linguistic feature, which is usually regarded not only peripheral, but rather trivial, namely, the number of graphemes in a written word, is established (Tourney, 1980: 114-115).

translating is intended, the relevancy is established from *ST*'s point of view, and its reconstruction in TL is set as a precondition for the establishment of an adequate translation. In other words, in adequate translation, the "similar relevant features" which both ST and TT are "relatable to" are determined by and proportionate to the extent and mode of relevancy for ST. (Cf. to this Toury, 1980: 37-39)

* * *

The method that we have adopted for the purpose of our "exercise in optimal translating" is very simple: (a) to sort out one source textual segment, regard it as "closed" in itself and analyze (or decompose) it with the aim of establishing those features, which are relevant to it, and their bearings on the initial translatability and on the actual translating of the selected segment into various target languages, standing in various relationships to the source language, (b) to go on and insert the same translational problem, relating to the same initial textual segment, in ever wider contexts within the same text, and examine the resulting modifications in the hierarchical order of relevancy of the features of the initial segment and the consequent changes in the ability to reconstruct them in other languages. While doing this, we shall ignore the new translational problems, introduced by the widening context itself, and use it only to shed new light on our focal problem, in a sort of simulation of a normal, successive process of text reading and interpretation (cf., e.g., Perry, 1979) for the purpose of translating.

FIRST STAGE:

A SUNKEN ROUTE AND ITS SHAPE

'What is it you're fallen into?' asked Scrubb.

'It's a kind of trench, or it might be a kind of sunken lane or something,' said Jill. [1] *'It runs quite straight.'*

'Yes, by Jove,' said Scrubb. 'And it runs due north! [...]'

[...]

'What happens farther on?'

'Half a sec. I'll go and see,' said Jill. She got up and walked along the trench; but before she had gone far, [2] *it turned sharply to the right.* [...]

'What's [3] *round the corner?*' asked Scrubb.

[...]

It proved, however, a disappointing exploration. They went [3] *round the right-hand turn and straight on* for a few paces. Here there was [4] *a choice of ways: [5] straight on again, or [6] sharp to the right.* 'That's no good,' said Scrubb, glancing down [6] *the right-hand turn*, 'that would be taking us back-south.' He went [5] *straight on*, but once more, in a few steps, they found [7] *a second turn to the right* [8]. But this time there was *no choice of ways*, for the trench they had been following here *came to a dead end.*

'No good,' grunted Scrubb. Jill lost no time in turning and leading the way back. (Lewis, 1974: 89-90. my italics)

This passage from C.S. Lewis's "Story for Children" *The Silver Chair* describes a walk taken by two children, Jill Pole and Eustace Scrubb. Like any other description in the linear medium of language, this one too is necessarily disassembled and reduced to its components (indicated by the italics in the quotation), which are presented not only separately, but also successively.

Thus, the passage in question outlines a certain shape, or plane figure, in eight moves (indicated by the numerals in square brackets). If the discrete components are assembled (that is, actually regarded as elements of one ordered set), the resulting shape will of course resemble the Latin capital letter E, as shown in Fig. 1:

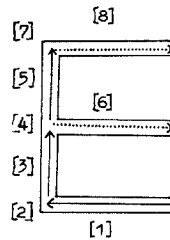


Figure 1

[1], [3], [5], [6], and [8] indicate five straight lines. Those marked by continuous arrows are actually followed by the children. The others are only glanced into, and are therefore marked with dotted arrows. However, they too form constituents of the overall reconstructed shape. (Of course, [3] and [5] together form one single straight line, which, however, is broken in two parts in the verbal description.) [2], [4], and [7], in turn, indicate the points, or vertexes, where the straight lines intersect.

However, in the cited passage itself there is absolutely nothing to encourage the assembly of the eight (or seven) components into one definite complex entity (shape), not to mention its identification with the letter E. For one thing, the children themselves, who follow the route, never suspect the similarity underlying this identification. Moreover, they do not even exhaust the entire shape in actual walking, so that they—and we, who stick to their point of view—do not know, for instance, whether the line [6] leads to a dead end (as Fig. 1 suggests) or to another turn (in which case the shape of the route may altogether lose its similarity to the letter E!). Even if we do regard the description as exhausting the components of the route, it is nevertheless quite possible to imagine its overall position in relation to the horizon in many different angles (such as Π , \sqcup , E , or \exists), whereas E as a graphological entity (a grapheme) has one fixed position. Thus, strong reasons are needed to enforce this one posture as the only one proper for the shape of the route, and such reasons are not to be found in our passage. (Obviously enough, the *topographic* directions given in the text—“it runs due north” for line [1] and “back-south” for the non-realized line [6]—are no such reason. At this first stage they do not even seem significant for the shape, that is, a highly relevant feature of the passage. Their significance will emerge only much later, namely, in the Fifth Stage of our presentation.)

If the similarity of the route's shape to the letter E is not a relevant feature of our passage (that is, it has no function in it beyond the mere possible visual similarity), the translational problem also appears as restricted to the level of

the constituents of the shape, or, rather, to their *verbal* representation. The fact that this representation is English may even be regarded immaterial, since it is the *referential* function which is dominant here, the referents are univocal, and—as Roman Jakobson put it—“all cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language” (1959: 234). Since, however, this *is* an English text, the only problems of translatability and translating concern the *linguistic* entities used in the presentation of the constituents of the shape, and especially key words and phrases such as “[quite] straight”, “turn sharply”, “right”, “corner”, and the like.

SECOND STAGE:
A GRAPHEME AND ITS “DISTINCTIVE FEATURES”

Only some 16 pages later it becomes clear that the shape outlined on pp. 89-90 is not only superficially *similar* to the Latin capital E, but actually *is* a periphrastic description of it (without, of course, losing its identity and significance as a route!). Incidentally, it is one of the children themselves, Scrubb, who makes this observation, retrospectively (in terms of the narrated events):

[...] We got into the letter E [...]. That was your sunk lane. We walked along [1] **the bottom stroke of the E**, due north—[2] **turned to our right** [3] **along the upright**—came to another [4] **turn to the right**—that's [6] **the middle stroke**—and then [4] [5] **went on to** [7] **the top left-hand corner**, or (if you like) the north-eastern corner of the letter [8], and came back. [...] (Lewis, 1974: 106, author's boldface).

If we compare the two passages, it becomes clear how every constituent of the mere possible plane figure is re-interpreted so as to function as a “distinctive feature” of a certain grapheme in a certain alphabetic system (cf. Catford, 1965: 62):

[1]	It runs quite straight	the bottom stroke of the E
[2]	it turned sharply to the right	We [...] turned to our right
[3]	round the corner; round the right-hand turn and straight on	along the upright
[4]	a choice of ways	turn to the right [or] on
[6]	sharp to the right; the right-hand turn	the middle stroke
[5]	straight on	on
[7]	a second turn to the right	the top left-hand corner [...]
		of the letter
[8]	no choice of ways; a dead end	(implied in [7])

Although the term “distinctive features” was used in relation to the function of the constituents of the shape, we are *not* dealing here with Catford's “graphological translation” (1965: ch. 9), since these constituents are rendered in language, and not in “graphic substance”. This is, then, quite a normal (or “total”, in Catford's nomenclature) translation situation. However, the transition from mere physical entities to linguistic distinctive features on the *object* level makes it necessary to readjust the hierarchical order of relevancy of the features *of the first passage*, which bears on its optimal translating as well.


It now turns out that the translation problem in this passage does not, after all, reside in the discrete components of a mere shape (and their linguistic

representation), but first and foremost in the shape *as a whole* and its visual identity with a foremost in the shape *as a whole* and its visual identity with a certain graphological unit in a certain alphabetic system.

If, in view of the second passage, the first passage is now translated into another language which uses the same, Latin alphabet, there seems to emerge no new problem: since the shape in question, along with its value as a grapheme, exists in all the languages that use the Latin alphabet, the adequate translational solution on this level seems simple, even automatic. The only problems remain those which were discussed at the end of the previous section.

If, on the other hand, the translation is made into a language which uses a non-Latin writing system, the initial translational problem may well move to the "graphological" domain; for, obviously, not every alphabet includes a grapheme, or even a composite graphological entity, which shares all the features of the Latin E (which turn out to be relevant because of the relevancy of the letter itself).

If such a letter does not exist in the target language (as is the case, for instance, with Arabic), then another letter, having different features, that is, another shape, may be selected. In that case, the description of the discrete constituents of the shape would have to be adjusted to it, with an automatic change in the route followed by the children, otherwise a certain rate of incongruence will occur between the two passages, which is liable to cause a gross deviation from the initial condition of adequacy, namely, on the higher, *textual* level.

Taking Hebrew as our target language, the nearest combination of the "distinctive features" of the Latin E, which is a letter in the Hebrew (upper-case) alphabet, hence "the appropriate graphological translation equivalent" (Catford, 1965: 63) on the basis of their "relationship to [almost] 'the same' graphic substance" (1965: 62), is . The only difference between the source and target units is in terms of their positions in relation to the horizon (or writing line), which has not [yet] been established as a highly relevant feature of the source text. In other words, the technique of "minimal change" has been properly—from the point of view of optimal translation—applied: to a peripheral, less relevant feature.

These modifications in the translational considerations and their bearings on the possible translational decisions become even more crucial in the following stages of our exercise².

THIRD STAGE: THE GRAPHEME IN ITS LINGUISTIC USAGE

To be sure, our second passage is preceded by a few sentences, which add yet another dimension of relevancy to the shape outlined in the first passage. This

2. The attentive reader will have noticed that the second stage might, or even should have been broken down to two successive phases:
(1) the route as a grapheme,
(2) the route as a certain grapheme.
This hasn't been done, for the sake of brevity.

dimension draws from the letter E being a constituent of a written utterance in *one* of the languages, which utilize the Latin alphabet, namely, the *English* language:

[...] To crown all, in large, dark lettering across the centre of the pavement, ran the words UNDER ME.

[...]

'What I don't quite understand', said Jill, 'is how we didn't see the lettering? Or could it have come there since last night. [...]

'Why, you chump!' said Scrubb. 'We did see it. We got into the lettering. Don't you see? We got into the letter E in ME. (Lewis, 1974: 105-106)

Thus, at this stage, the shape which might have emerged from the successive description of the route on pp. 89-90 already functions in at least *five* sets of relationships, which lend it five types of information (or: information on five levels):

- (1) *a route*, that is a landscape item, whose shape may well be immaterial;
- (2) *a (geometric) shape* which may lack any further function;
- (3) *a grapheme*, that is, a linguistic unit, a fact which may, however, be rather accidental;
- (4) *a certain letter (E) in a certain alphabet (Latin)*, in which various languages can be written;
- (5) *a letter in the English usage of that alphabet*, in which, however, any number of messages may be written.

These five types of information imply each other when regarded "downwards", from the fifth towards the first level (which, of course, becomes possible only at this point!), but by no means predict each other under the "upward" observation, which follows the chronological unfolding of these pieces of information during the process of reading and interpretation.

Moreover, in view of the adjoining context, the phrase UNDER ME turns out to be not a mere means of inserting the letter E in an English text, but a highly relevant feature of this text as a whole, which therefore bears on the functions fulfilled by the letter within it: upon seeing this phrase, the children and their companion, the legendary figure of Puddle-glum, the Marsh-Wiggle, immediately start to discuss its significance, accept it as a directive rather than as a mere affirmative proposition, and finally find a way of actually going under the stone which bears this inscription. The story then goes on in a place called "Underland", an obvious realization of the "under me."

Thus, the *semantic* content of the phrase lends the route-shape-letter another, sixth informational level:

- (6) *a letter in a certain alternance* in the English language.

Obviously, the fifth and sixth informational levels, which have been introduced at this stage, cause changes in the hierarchical order of relevancy of the source text features as set in the previous stage, and not simply add a few new features on top of them. These changes may once more necessitate corresponding modifications of the translational considerations and decisions of a translator, who is acting under the "adequacy" constraint.

FOURTH STAGE :
A TEXT WITHIN A TEXT

However, the letter E is not a constituent of the phrase UNDER ME only, with all its semantic and thematic values, but also — though certainly via this phrase — an element of a *micro-text*, that is, an utterance which, though self-contained, is also incorporated in its entirety in another, larger text and functions as one of its elements. This insertion does not obliterate the centrality of the semantic value of UNDER ME itself, but it does bring into the picture new factors and new features, which may well cause further changes in the hierarchical deployment of the translational problem posed by our first passage:

[...] those words are all that is left of a longer script, which in ancient times [...] expressed this verse:

Though under Earth and throneless now I be,
Yet, while I lived, all Earth was under me.

(Lewis, 1974: 134)

The additional informational levels which are introduced by this verse are :

(7) *a letter in an English poetic text*, pertaining to a certain textual model and tradition, that of the couplet. On this level, the emphasis is on the *text-type*, which may, of course, serve to communicate many contents in accordance with the English tradition of the utilization of this type, not to mention the many possible contents that deviate from this tradition;

(8) *a letter in a certain English poetic text* pertaining to that textual model and tradition. At this informational level, the emphasis is shifted to the *realization* of the model and to its actual semantic contents.

The dominance of the contents of the entire micro-text (8) over that of the phrase “under me” (6) is further established by the following sentence, which concludes the recitation of the verse:

From which it is plain that some great king of the ancient giants, who lies buried here, caused *this boast* to be cut in the stone over his sepulchre. (Lewis, 1974: 134; my italics)

Thus, from the point of view of the couplet and the information conveyed by it, the “distinctive features” of the grapheme E and its value as a “Latin” and “English” letter, not to mention its mere form and the constituents of the route taken by the children, turn out to be fairly peripheral. Among other proofs and indications, this shift of relevancy, which occurred in the reading (and consideration) process, also has a *graphical* representation: up to now, not only the discrete letter E, but also the word ME and the phrase UNDER ME, were always printed in capital letters, thus presenting to the eye over and over again the *shape* of the letter, and by doing so reinforcing its relevancy. As against it, in the couplet they are printed in lower-case letters, so that the shape of the e (which, as a letter, is still part of [the written version³ of] “me”

3. It could also be claimed that this is the first time that the children do not *see* the inscription with their own eyes: it is recited for them from memory, and not read by or to them. Moreover, the inscription is presented as something that no longer exists, and therefore cannot at all be seen. For our purposes, however, both these interpretations amount to the same thing.

and “under me”) is no longer congruent with the descriptions given in the first two passages.

In relation to these two passages and their optimal translation it seems, therefore, that the problems which draw from the shape itself and from its function as a grapheme have already been exhausted. However, we shall soon find out that this is not the case, and that newly discovered features will necessitate further modifications of our translation problem.

In the meantime, a point of general validity seems in order: the greater the number of different features (or informational levels) which are relevant to a text, the worse the “opening conditions” for the establishment of adequate translation. That is to say, the rate of initial translatability diminishes according to the following law: “translatability is high when one translates no more than a single kind of information” and vice versa (Even-Zohar, 1971: 43-44; English summary: IX), or, in a somewhat modified formulation: “translatability is high when the textual relations are not complex” and vice versa (Even-Zohar, 1971: 137; English summary: XVIII. Cf. also Toury, 1980: 24-26).

Thus, when the translation is made into a language which uses the Latin alphabet, the nature of the translation problem is no longer dictated in the first place by the visual identity of the shape of the route with that of the letter E, but by the function of this letter in an English [micro-] text, sentence, phrase and word (in this order!): only accidentally, hence very seldom, will the letter E—which in itself does exist in TL—enter in a TL word which is semantically (or pragmatically) equivalent to the English ME, this word—in a TL phrase which is semantically (and syntactically) equivalent to the English phrase UNDER ME and also rhymes with a TL equivalent of the English word “be”, or with any other TL element which may take up its position, and so on⁴. Therefore, some of the features, which have been found to be relevant for our source text, will no doubt have to be sacrificed (that is, modified, or even altogether omitted) in order to make possible the reconstruction of its other features in the target language; that is to say, so that any translation which aspires to adequacy could be established in the first place.

Obviously, following this one principle, many alternative solutions may present themselves, each one pivoting around the reconstruction in TL of another subset of the source text features, or even of the very same features in different deployments. Therefore, not only will none of these alternatives be a *fully* adequate translation, but each one of them will stand in (at least slightly) different translational relationships to the source text, a fact which stands in sharp contradiction to any a priori, rigid notion of “translation equivalence” as a certain translational relationship. (Cf. to this Toury, 1980: 63-70, 89-111.)

If the translation is made into a language which does *not* use the Latin alphabet, the initial rate of translatability is, of course, even lower, according

4. For the sake of brevity and simplicity, I am not putting due emphasis on the fact that the letter E is the last letter not only of ME and UNDER ME, but also of the entire couplet. This fact may, of course, turn out to be textually relevant. Thus, for instance, in “realistic” (or mimetic) terms it might be easier to assume that Jill fell into the tail of the first engraved letter on their way, and not just anywhere *en route*.

to the following general law: “translatability is high when a pair of languages are of a close basic ‘type’” and vice versa (Even-Zohar, 1971: 72; English summary: IX). If a letter, which shares all (or most of, or even many of) the distinctive features of the Latin E, exists in TL, the problem is similar, if not identical, to that involved in translating into a language which does make use of the Latin alphabet (the possible difference in the phonological value is, of course, immaterial for our translational problem). IF, on the other hand, such a letter, or combination of letters, does not exist in the target language, then another letter will have to be selected, with the necessary corresponding changes in the linear description of the route in the first two passages (cf. the second stage). This letter may be selected either in random (in which case the TL word(s) replacing the English phrase “under me” may have to be adjusted to it, and the entire inscription—or couplet, if the translator chooses to retain this form, thus granting it a high rate of relevancy—to them), or the other way around, that is, from among the letters comprising the entire paradigm of semantic-syntactic TL equivalents of that phrase (or couplet), or, finally, as some compromise between these two extreme alternatives.

Returning to our Hebrew example, if we stick to our choice of the letter ׀ as the “graphological” equivalent of E (and there are good reasons to do so, not in the last place the heuristic principle of “least effort”, which, in this case, says that there is no need to rewrite the entire description of the route in the first and second passages if one can render them more or less literally while changing something else, which is much smaller and much easier to handle), we shall have to adjust to it the word and/or phrase (and eventually also the entire micro-text where it is embedded), since a normal paradigm of Hebrew semantic-syntactic equivalents for the English phrase “under me” will hardly include the letter ׀, especially not in a terminal position (to which cf. note 4). It might be added that the Hebrew ׀, unlike the Latin E, is a *consonant* letter; but, as we said previously, this fact is rather peripheral in our case.

However, even this decision still leaves some features of the letter (and shape) in the source text untouched upon, not to say: unaccounted for: (1) the constituents of the letter in their relation to its overall position; (2) the geographical directions and their relation to the posture of the letters (and the words containing them).

1. Obviously, the decision to substitute the Hebrew ׀ for the Latin E brings forth inevitable changes in the description of the relative parts of the letters in the second passage, due to the difference in their positions in relation to the posture of the two different letters, unless one is prepared to accept an almost nonsensical mixture of Hebrew and Latin features. These changes appear, on the surface, as “translation errors” on the semantic-lexical level. Nevertheless, from an overall, textual point of view, they are *not* to be considered mistranslations, but rather adequate solutions, since they renounce features of the source text which were found to be *peripheral* to the case in point while retaining and reconstructing the more central ones.

Thus, if the translator decides to lead his heroes in (the shape which constitutes) the Hebrew letter ׀ from right to left—

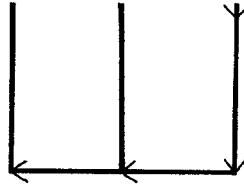


Figure 2

(which has more features in common with the original than leading them from left to right, in addition to the first alternative being more in keeping with the direction in which the Hebrew language is written and read), “the bottom stroke” will have to be rendered by something like *ha-qav ha-me’unax ha-yemani* (literally: the right perpendicular line), “the upright”—by *ha-qav ha-ofqi* (the horizontal line), and “the top left-hand corner”—by *ha-pina ha-smalit ha-taxtona* (the bottom left-hand corner). Only the “middle stroke” will be exempt from these changes, since it refers to the position of the line in question to the other two parallel lines, a relational feature which is, of course, retained by the Hebrew \sqcup .

2. If the translator into Hebrew retains the geographical directions as they are given in the original—and it is quite possible to do so, since these directions refer to certain constituents of the route-shape, which have been completely reproduced in the Hebrew substitute —

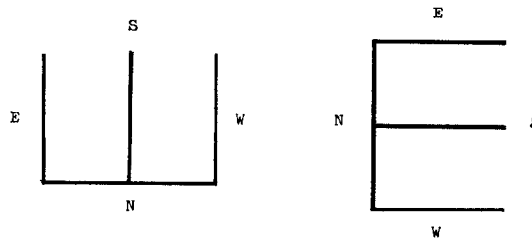


Figure 3

the immediate result will be that, at least implicitly (because it has never really been stated in the text), the entire inscription will have changed its position: whereas the English one runs southward

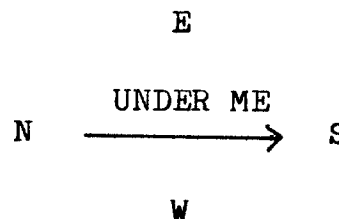


Figure 4

the Hebrew wording will necessarily run eastward:

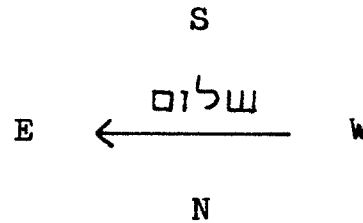


Figure 5

If, on the other hand, the translator wishes to retain the (implicit) direction of the entire inscription, he will have to make some changes in the (explicit) directions mentioned in the first two passages and concerning the single letter:

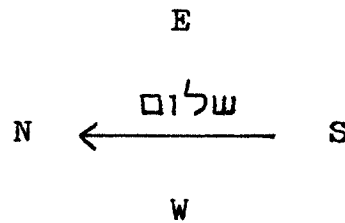


Figure 6

that is,

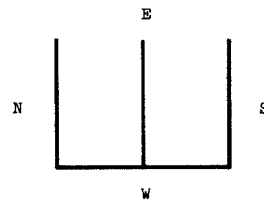


Figure 7

How is he to choose between these two alternatives while staying faithful to the basic principle of “sharing (or: reconstructing) the greatest possible number of the source’s relevant features”? In other words, which one will be regarded as more relevant to ST, the direction of the entire inscription (which is, it should be recalled, implied only!), or the direction of the discrete letter (which appears explicitly in the description of the route taken by the children)?

In the cited passages themselves there is no ground to prefer one of these solutions to the other. If there is any basis for such a preference at all (which is by no means a condition for the “well-formedness” of a text!), it should be looked for in an ever wider context, up to the entire book, or even beyond its limits.

FIFTH STAGE:
THE POSITION OF THE COUPLET IN THE ENTIRE STORY

In view of the entire story it becomes clear that the important thing is that the *general* route taken by the children and their companion, Puddleglum—which includes the letter E of the phrase “under me”, which used to be the ending of an old inscription, but is by no means reducible to it—is northward. Thus, already at the beginning of the book the travellers are told: “you must journey out of Narnia *to the north* till you come to the ruined city of the ancient giants. [...] you shall find a writing on a stone in that ruined city, and you must do what the writing tells you” (p. 29; my italics), and many sentences throughout the book make it clear that they actually follow the prescribed order. So does also the “map of the wild lands of the north,” which is printed at the beginning of the book.

The importance of the north while going on a mission which is intended, in the long run, to repair faults and heal harms, is reinforced by its being a well-rooted cultural (including literary) model in the Western, Judaeo-Christian world⁵. It is especially relevant for Lewis’s Narnia series, part of which *The Silver Chair* forms, where all the evils actually proceeded from the north.

Hence, it turns out that the important thing is that the first stroke of the letter, into which Jill falls and along which she then walks with Scrubb, will continue their general line of progression, that is, run northwards. If this feature is retained by the Hebrew translation (by an adequate rendering of the linguistic representation of the constituents of the shape-letter in the first two passages), it necessarily follows that the entire inscription will run eastward, as in Fig. 5.

A FINAL OBSERVATION
ON TRANSLATIONAL SHIFTS

It so turns out that this 90 degree turn in the general direction of the inscription, which is an automatic outcome of the subscription to a textual constraint, adds to the coherence of the story: it is when the children look out of the window in Jill’s room at the Giants’ castle of Harfang (pp. 104-105), which opens southwards, that they are supposed to discover the phrase UNDER ME and read it for the first time. But, since these two words themselves run in the same direction, they should be conceived of as growing further and further away from them, which means, in accordance with our notion of perspective, that they also grow ever smaller; especially, of course, our terminal E. There is even more to it, if we take into account the fact that these words had originally been at the end of a five times longer inscription. In reality-like terms it is therefore not at all easy to read them! At any rate, an eastward direction of the inscription like the one resulting in the Hebrew translation, as we have

5. Thus already in the Bible, where the direction of the north has frequently retained traces of a mythical background. And cf. especially Jer. 1:14, 4:6, 6:1, or Joel 2:20. In this connection, it may be recalled that our author, Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963) was not only, not even chiefly, a writer of children’s books, but first and foremost a theologian and a literary scholar.

followed its considerations, is much easier to read under these circumstances, as demonstrated by Fig. 8:

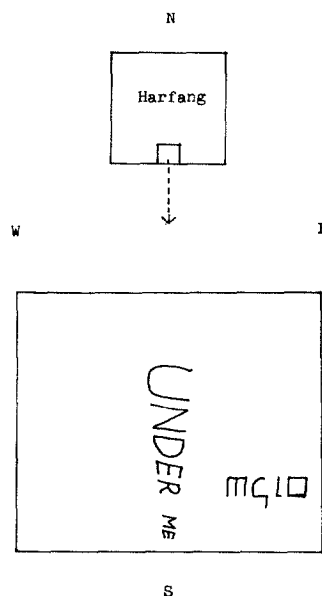


Figure 8

This may serve as an illustration to yet another universal of translation, namely, that translating inevitably involves *shifts* from the original (or deviations from its maximally adequate translation). Under comparative observation, there may occur shifts which seem to alter very little, shifts which impress the observer as being losses, and, finally (as in our case), shifts which appear to be textual gains and improvements. However, whether a loss or an improvement, both are first and foremost shifts from the original, which are a necessary companion to any translation, even if one strives at the establishment of an adequate rendering. It goes without saying that the looser the application of the initial norm of adequacy (e.g., in favour of greater acceptability of the translation as a target language text, and/or as a target literary text, or even as a translation into that language/literature), the greater the resulting shifts.

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