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The Complicity of Translation

Robert Smith

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Article abstract

On discute de la responsabilité morale des traducteurs par rapport aux textes qu'ils traduisent; on tente de savoir quelle est l'attitude à adopter devant un texte mensonger, trompeur ou discriminatoire.

THE COMPLICITY OF TRANSLATION

Résumé

On discute de la responsabilité morale des traducteurs par rapport aux textes qu'ils traduisent; on tente de savoir quelle est l'attitude à adopter devant un texte mensonger, trompeur ou discriminatoire.

What is the moral responsibility of translators, especially if they are called upon to translate texts which are obviously false, misleading or obfuscating? Indeed, most translators work for the powers that be and have to practise their trade translating propaganda, gobbledygook and confusing jargon. Now, any writer's manual will tell you that the purpose of good writing is to be clear, concise and transparent. However, it seems that a translator's duty is to respect the level of language, the tone of a source text and, above all, to convey the meaning of the original, no more, no less.

Ever since the Nuremberg trials, bureaucrats have a reputation for being faceless cogs in a machinery, numbers or robots. Likewise, a translator may feel this way when he or she is employed by a multinational corporation, the civil service or any large office. After translating several thousand office

memos, government reports or obscure political speeches, he or she may feel quite alienated, just like Winston Smith in Orwell's *1984*. The work may become meaningless, because the source texts are poorly written, laden as they are with administrative jargon. One might wonder if words like "proposition," "proposal," "implement" and "department" will some day be considered dirty words, just like the French catchphrase "collaboration." Remember that in the Vichy government, it was flogged to death in political speeches; however, after the War, "collaborateurs" were quite in disrepute. Likewise, at some time in the future, the fate of today's gobbledygook may take a turn for the worse.

The problem with administrative jargon is that it seems to need to be translated into plain English. In an essay called "Gobbledygook"[1], Stuart Chase attempts to do so. Here is an example: "An office manager sent this memo to his chief: "Verbal contact with Mr. Blank regarding the attached notification of promotion has elicted the attached representation intimating that he prefers to decline the assignment." Seems Mr. Blank didn't want the job. The use of Latin, abstract, technical words obscure the meaning of a text. And since the introduction of computers into the office, a conversation is no longer just plain talking; it is an "interface." I am sure, if you are employed by a government department, you could conjure up numerous examples.

Secondly, suppose you have an assignment to translate a speech by a politician who is obviously lying through his teeth. Will you respect the source text? Quit your job out of moral conviction? Expose the lies with a footnote from the translator? The problem with translation is that we are accomplices of our clients, and our only responsibility is to render the meaning of the source text into the target language, as objectively and invisibly as possible. We have no say in the matter. Our job is to translate English gobbledygook into French gobbledygook, because that means to respect the level of language. If we wrote a politician's speech in plain English, we would, quite simply, blow his cover. Also, we have to give readers the benefit of the doubt. We have to credit them with enough intelligence to comprehend the text for themselves.

I would suggest that the moral responsibility of the translator is precisely to be neutral. To be faithful to the source text, no matter how much it bothers your conscience. Of course, we are not called upon to complicate matters. We are not supposed to translate plain English into gobbledygook; we may even improve the style of the original. But we are doomed to be neutral and respect the tone, intention and meaning of the original writer. Just as some other professionals, we have to be faithful to our clients: take for instance, a lawyer, who has to defend a client whom he knows is guilty. Once you take on the job, you are bound by the inherent limitations of the trade.

1. CHASE, Stuart (1978): "Gobbledygook," in *Language Awareness*, St. Martin's Press, New York, p. 39.

ROBERT SMITH