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Article abstract

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A *BENDED* PROXIMATION: COMMENTS ON TIFFOU

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Résumé

Tiffou présente les difficultés, voire les impossibilités de la traduction au niveau de l'équivalent linguistique. On retient trois points : la traduction est une tâche exigeante, qui demande une compétence linguistique et une éducation culturelle très poussées ; elle n'est pas une opération mécanique anodine qu'on peut confier à n'importe qui, voire à une machine ; le traducteur n'est pas un magicien capable de faire l'impossible, mais un créateur comme tout autre ayant le pouvoir de prendre des décisions quant à la présentation d'une nouvelle vision du monde. Tiffou a réussi à nous mettre en garde quant aux attentes des consommateurs des traductions et à celles des auteurs traduits. La linguistique peut augmenter les connaissances métalinguistiques du traducteur, mais c'est avec la connaissance des procédés de traduction qu'on ferait l'application productive de ces structures linguistiques.

It is quite comforting for translators to know that, coming from outside the ranks of translation, some outsiders like Tiffou do not take translation lightly. In his paper, Tiffou fully acknowledges the complexities involved in the translation process. Central to these is the difficulty (or, for Tiffou, the *impossibility*) of translating certain things. Presupposing "equivalence", he points out that certain linguistic categories do not lend themselves to easy or *exact* translation. I take no issue with his excellent demonstration of this claim. I do, however, have some difficulty taking the notion of grammatical equivalence in translation seriously even if, as he says, "*la linguistique fournit les raisons les plus évidentes de cette impossibilité*". At issue is his own affirmation that "*une langue est spécifique et il est vain de croire qu'on peut trouver dans une autre ses équivalents exacts quelque soit l'aspect qu'on en retient*". For the trained translator, there is no vain speculation as to whether an exact equivalent will be found in the target language; the source language linguistic structures are only a guide as to what is to be said and how it should be rendered.

Tiffou in fact emphasizes the artistic and creative dimension of translation. His demonstration of the impossibility of mechanical equivalence and the need for what I have termed a "bended proximation", encapsulates the fact that, like the messenger in ancient Greece (Pidipidees), the translator must deliver both the message and the desired truth! In having to deliver in spite of "linguistic impossibilities", the translator does not have to come out "losing" or "winning" but "noble" and "legitimate" in this choiceless struggle to inform the **other** as requested.

To tackle the issue of grammatical equivalence as a way of demonstrating the fundamental difficulties in a translation, Tiffou uses examples from morphosemantics, morphology, syntax, morphosyntax, word formation, cognition and semiotics. Each sample demonstrates how impossible it is for any translation to be based on "exact equivalence". However, it is the effectiveness of this demonstration that reveals another fundamental fact: that translation is not, cannot, and should not be considered as an exercise in lexical proximation or grammatical equivalence. Those who approach it this way are probaly not trained translators but possibly very ordinary bilinguals.[1] Tiffou sums up his demonstra-

tion by showing that translation requires lingua-cultural intercomprehension on what one might describe as full bi-cultural initiation. Following is a review of each of the illustrative categories in Tiffou's paper. We will summarize, compare and comment on these, and make some suggestions and propose some solutions.

As far as morphosemantics is concerned, Tiffou persuasively demonstrates that meaning is not necessarily lost in a translation as a result of morphological differences in the shape and rules governing the linguistic structures of each language. This will be the case only when an attempt is made at supersimposing words, in their varying forms, from one language on to those of the other. For example, it is futile to attempt obtaining the collective form of the word "mûre" from Breton ***nouar*** (coll) v/s *nouarenn* (sing) v/s *nouarennon* (pl), where

mûre = sing; nouarenn = sing.
mûre = coll, but nouar = coll.

The point is that the notion can be expressed in both languages or any other, for that matter, but the linguistic form (in this case morphosemantic) is sometimes not transposable and in fact need **not** necessarily be transposed. The skills of the translator and the flexibility of language make translation possible, in spite of an apparent handicap. Even though the tense and mood of some verbs allow some languages like Basque to express subtleties in tense, the loss of this specification in another language may actually be welcome or desirable! Adaptation is a cultural prescription in translation, as is the case when translating from Greek to French. The reason is, as Tiffou puts it, that "*les termes imparfait, parfait et plus-que-parfait recouvrent des réalités différentes selon la langue considérée*". Only proper cultural initiation in both linguistic cultures will enable the translator to capture the nuances and ambiguities of each of the languages.

Regarding morphology, Tiffou is a lot more cautious. He points out that morphology varies from one language to the other. The abundant or selective use, or even near absence of morphology makes lexical or grammatical proximation arduous perhaps the translator should not be much concerned with it. Knowledge of the choices made within each linguistic system is indispensable but keeping track of how each system works is what the translator does with ease to guarantee success in his otherwise onerous task. Such a translator will be satisfied with a locally speaking less than satisfactory rendition of **eo Romam** (unambiguously making movement) from Latin to French. In fact, the use of the accusative in Latin is a linguistic choice that French has chosen to ignore or omit: the translator acknowledges this fact and moves on. It does not or should not constitute a stumbling block.

For syntax, Tiffou clearly demonstrates that syntactic constructions vary from one group of languages to another, and that a search for equivalence between construction types can be a difficult task indeed. The question is not whether or not the structural choices made by different languages are an indication of a difference in thought processes but whether these differences necessarily lead to the loss of information. Tiffou attempts an answer with a classroom experience and the result, in his own words, is that "*il est possible d'accommoder la connaissance linguistique d'une langue à une autre langue, qu'elle y trouve son compte ou non.*" The solution to the paradox generated by this claim would be, Tiffou adds, to set up experiments which can empirically show how grammatical adaptation can be used to compliment inadequacies in a given language system or an individual's cognitive grammatical repertoire. I should have thought that word order like any other aspect of grammar in a given language is systemic and agreed upon by users of the language. But it is malleable enough for users to innovate, even abusively, so that the discovery of new structures in other languages can be calqued and later adopted. The pas-

sage, therefore, from an SVO to a VOS construction may fail to render topicalisation and its interpretation exactly from one language to the other as in:

a)	**SVO**	This lion will kill us all
	VOS	Kill us all it will, this lion
b)	**SVO**	Ene njoh e djowa (this lion it kill us will)
	VOS	Edjowa, ene nyoh (it kill us will, this lion),

but the bottom line is that the stylistic choice of passing from one structural choice to another can be mimicked, if not innovated in the target language for emphasis or special effect (witness a—>b: English—>Bakweri). It is true, as Tiffou argues, that word order is sometimes the resounding signature of a given language; it gives each language an identity of its own. An understanding of these kinds of linguistic choices and ubituquousness makes syntactic structure less of a problem for the translator.

Tiffou deliberately associates syntactic structure to word formation in an attempt to demonstrate the role of embedding in both collocation and morphological change, in some languages such as Basque, Bakweri and Swahili. Using Basque, Tiffou shows that apparent structural redundancy may be morphologically pertinent. The following example illustrates this point :

Basque	eman	dautzut		sg

given   I (it to you) have
I have given it to you

	eman	dauzkitzut		sl

given   I have them to you
*I have given **them** to you*

An infix-type embedding in the plural auxiliary (have + them), which produces [dau{zki}tzut] using [zki], is morphologically pertinent. Here, focalization within the auxiliary verb may distinguish between singular and plural. Any attempt at replicating this structure may result in rule-bending in the target language or it could add new meaning which was not expressed or intended in the source text.

Using open-ended embedding, labelled pseudo-over declension, Tiffou again shows that some languages can resort to the alternate use of inflectional and derivational morphemes to create noun and verb phrases. Tiffou's examples of "*enchassements en nombre variable*" dramatize the complexity of some of the expressions he uses as examples. Again the presumed "*distortion [...] inévitable [...]*" in A. Rébushi's illustration of the semantic opposition between:

(1) "den gizonarekin" (with the man who is) and
(2) "denarekin" (with the one who is),

lies in the identification of a word boundary in (1) and the absence of one in (2). For the translator, two things are possible:

—   the semantic nuance is not perceived at all, or
—   an erroneous interpretation is made.

Based on my argument that cultural initiation is or should be closely linked to linguistic proficiency, it is unlikely that the translator will understand Rebuschi's phrases and somehow fail to translate them because "*il est impossible en français de marquer que [...] il y a frontière de mots [dans (1)] alors qu'il n'y en a pas [dans (2)]*". There is certainly a difficulty at the morphosyntactic level but it is only one among many that the translation

somehow resolves. In this case, the translator identifies the word boundary in the source language, notes its absence or irrelevance in the target language, and then proceeds to providing an interpretative rendition of the idea to be communicated using the available morphosyntactic tools of the traget language. This linguistic complexity creates a certain awareness, not a problem, for the translator. Here again, metalinguistic awareness should not take precedence over knowledge of translation processes, as the latter invariably always providing the solution to the apparent difficulty.

Using word formation and cognitive processing Tiffou seems to give the translator the green light to create: "*le traducteur se doit de donner des équivalences lorsqu'il n'y a pas de correspondance exacte entre la langue de départ et la langue d'arrivée*". That freedom to **decide** and **resolve** is strengthened by Tiffou's cognitive processing argument. The latter leaves refined and reliable translation in the hands of a skilled individual translator, rather than at the mercy of linguistic variability. Translators in this group certainly use the existing linguistic categories of their working languages to formulate thought, *i.e.* using repair, resolution or adaptive cross linguistic (equivalence[2]) strategies.

As Tiffou puts it, studies in discourse analysis have shown that a text, once written may have a life and an identity quite different from the author's. This gives the translator more liberty to interpret what he reads and understands rather than what the author thinks he wanted to say. "*Traduire c'est [vraiment] réécrire un texte dans une autre langue*," even if some of the re-writing involves substituting different levels of information. Tiffou is certainly right in pointing out that translation based on a text alone (*i.e.* without a cultural context or a resource person) may result in inappropriate substitution, thus failing to, in his words "*saisir l'intégralité d'un texte et ne peut de ce fait, le transposer*".

On the whole, Tiffou's broad re-examination of issues pertaining to grammatical equivalence has an enviable precision with respect to both traditional and non traditional exemplification. His empirical documentation of facts and the caution in his comments attest to his attempt at finding balance and giving credit where it is due. He has successfully demonstrated the difficulty and complexity involved in the translation process. His concern about the future of translation with the advent of machine translation is bound to appear less alarming when one considers the difficulties still to be surmounted by human translators.

It is a good thing to have Tiffou acknowledge that translation is not a simple exercise in lexical proximation, an indication that grammatical equivalence, cannot be taken seriously if the translator "*tout entier occuppé à se battre pour réduire ce qui est irréductible dans la langue de départ, il lui est loisible parfois de résoudre cette difficulté en adaptant la langue d'arrivée*". Such an adaptation takes into consideration the necessary conditions in which a given target language item can, or does, function as translation equivalent of a given source language item.[3] Most of all, the translator, like the messenger, need not neither win nor loose; all he claims is a certain amount of dignity and legetimacy for an exacting activity with such unequal appreciation.

Notes
1. One would make a distinction between knowledge and mastery of *translation processes*, as opposed to *metalinguistic knowledge*. A combination of both would be the ideal but very often, some translators try to make do with just one: knowledge of how one language system works or knowledge of the processes of translating.
2. Consider Vinay and Darbelnet's recourse to adaptation when equivalence is sought for figurative language. (J.-P. Vinay et J. Darbelnet, *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*, Montréal: Beauchemin. p. 257.)
3. See Cadford's "conditions of translation equivalence" in J. C. Cadford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, London: Oxford University Press, 1965. p. 49.