

On Translation: Some Unfinished Thoughts

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La traduction, qu'est-ce à dire? Phénoménologies de la traduction

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Article abstract

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ON TRANSLATION: SOME UNFINISHED THOUGHTS

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Résumé

Poursuivant sa réflexion critique dans la perspective sociolinguistique, l'auteur s'attache ici à dégager les traits distinctifs du phénomène de la traduction dans l'éclairage apporté par les notions de bilinguisme et de multilinguisme, rapport interlingual et langue(s) maternelle(s). Il conclut sur la problématique de l'enseignement de la traduction.

For Yves Murray, who has made so much possible

1. Translation is the activity constantly undertaken by some perfect bi/multilinguals, even when they appear not to be engaged in it.
2. These bi/multilinguals live in a third world, which requires owning two or more languages without being owned by either of them.
3. In the case of a bilingual, it is living in a third world, constructed by mastering and transcending the two she is a full citizen of.
4. We need to know why some citizens of this world don't engage in the activity that is generally called translation.
5. If language can't be what positivists want it to be, why should translation be what their cohorts want it to be? Besides, what they want is impossible not because it requires the transfer of something which is impossible to transfer but because what they think they want to transfer just does not exist (*pace* Leibniz).
6. There is no money, there is only currency. Anyone who thinks otherwise should try crossing the American-Canadian border a dozen times in succession, exchanging her currency every time.
7. Even to say that history of translation is translation of history may not be enough because there is no history independently of translations.
8. By the time Sanskrit *svet* 'white' comes back to India from Persia it becomes *safed*, no longer recognizable as an Indic word.
9. When asked: "Is it pronounced *tometo* or *tomato*?", Flip Wilson, the American t.v. comedian, replied: "Is what pronounced *tometo* or *tomato*?" There is no *it* to be pronounced or translated.
10. A good translation is less a faithful rendering from another language and more an exploration of the potentialities of the non-other language.
11. Translation difficulties/errors are not what they are called but indices of bi/multilingual incompetence.
12. An understanding of what is called translation may have to rely not on what translators offer but on what naive speakers offer as translations.
13. What some speakers offer as natural translation may, however, be simply the execution of the wishes of comprador elites.
14. The much-maligned normativist face of the non-natural translation has the positive face of resisting the compradores parading as naive speakers.
15. The only thing that does not seem to have a positive side is the non-native native playing the native **for** the non-native.

16. Just as the system of rules and principles the native speakers of a language know constitutes the grammar of that language, the system the perfect bi/multilinguals know may constitute translation (= its grammar).
17. Perhaps the best evidence for the nature and structure of that system is provided by societal bi/multilingual code-switching/mixing.
18. Just as a really competent speaker of her other languages elicits no comments, a really good translation merits but should not elicit any comments.
19. As an academic field, translation is best defined as that branch of anthropology in which the field comes to the investigator's office.
20. The teaching of translation is a bit like the teaching of the teaching of mathematics: mathematics can be taught, and perhaps teaching can be taught, but it is not clear if the teaching of the teaching of mathematics is possible. The teaching of translation, at any rate, is the subtle imposition of one's stylistic preferences on competent bi/multilinguals and of one's belief that the lack of necessary competence can be compensated for by mechanical crutches on incompetent bi/multilinguals.
21. Perhaps it is like all education: those who can be taught, needn't be; those who cannot be taught, must be.