

A Comparison of Translation Styles

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a comparison of translation styles

There are two contrasting schools of thought with regard to translation, according to Theodore Savory, the school which opts for « faithful » translations and the one which favors « free » translations¹. No one will argue that some translators, « freer » in their persuasion than others, are not more interested in the spirit than in the letter, more intent on producing an accurate over-all rendition of the central ideas and tone of the original than on merely squeezing out an interpretation on a narrow word-by-word, one-to-one basis. It will be seen, however, that a so-called free translation can often be more faithful to the original than a more literal version, and that the real dichotomy is not between « faithful » and « free » but rather between good and bad translations.

Two prime examples of this « faithful-free » polarity among translators are Louise Varèse, one of the « faithful », and Norman Cameron, one of the « free ». In a comparison of the different approaches that they use in their translations of Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer*², certain stylistic strategies stand out, as would be expected, which point up their differences. A few examples in each category should suffice to demonstrate the major techniques utilized.

While both Varèse and Cameron make extensive use of literal translation, many of the former's renditions seem rather stiff and unnatural; Cameron's version is much more fluid and sounds less like a translation. The following instances will illustrate the absurdity to which an overscrupulous fidelity to literal translation may lead :

RIMBAUD

1. Quel siècle à mains³ !

TRANSLATIONS

- Varèse : What an age of hands !
Cameron : What a manual age !

1. Theodore Savory, *The Art of Translation*, 2nd ed., Boston, The Writer, 1968, p. 50-51.
2. Norman Cameron, trans., *A Season in Hell*, by Arthur Rimbaud, London, John Lehmann, 1949; Louise Varèse, trans., *Une saison en enfer et le Bateau ivre. A Season in Hell and the Drunken Boat*, Norfolk (Conn.), New Directions, 1961.
3. Italics mine.

2. Ô mon abnégation, ô ma charité merveilleuse ! Ici-bas, pourtant !
 V. : O my abnegation, O my marvelous charity ! *here below, however !*
 C. : Think of my self-abnegation, my marvelous charity — *and down in these depths, too !*
3. Je n'aurai jamais ma main.
 V. : I shall never *have* my hand.
 C. : I shall never *be capable with* my hands.

As is evident, Varèse's « faithful », overprecise interpretation misses the mark : it not only sounds « foreign » in its manner and style, but it hardly makes sense in English, whether in context or not.

In addition to literal translation, the translator has another procedure at his disposal, « abridgement », which is simply a shortening, a concentration, a reduction in compass or scope with the retention of relative completeness. Neither translator uses this mode very much, due no doubt to the fact that Rimbaud's phraseology, in its poetic compactness, is already at a level of an almost irreducible minimum of terseness. Note the following examples :

1. cet élégant jeune homme, entrant dans la belle et calme maison...
 V. : going into the beautiful, calm house...
 C. : going into *the fine* house.
2. Faim, soif, danse, danse, danse, danse !
 V. : Hunger, thirst, shouts, dance, dance, dance, dance !
 C. : Hunger, thirst and shouting, *dance, dance, dance !*
3. Trois fois béni soit le conseil qui m'est arrivé !
 V. : Thrice blessed be the counsel that came to me !
 C. : Thrice happy the thought !

We note, in the first example given above, that Cameron has condensed Rimbaud's thought by reducing the two original adjectives *belle et calme* into one, « fine ». Varèse, on the other hand, is content to give a literal translation, as is her custom. Cameron's version seems to ring truer, and the beauty of the original phrase has not at all been diminished in the movement from one language to another.

Diametrically opposed to the procedure of abridgement is the technique of « amplification⁴ », a lengthening or enlargement of the original thought. This stylistic manoeuvre is brought into play where the source language utilizes fewer words than the target language to express the same idea. Cameron uses this device quite often, whereas Varèse does not, a principle which can be seen clearly in these sentences :

1. Mais ! qui a fait ma langue perfide tellement...
 V. : But who gave me so perfidious a tongue...
 C. : But, *here's a question*. Who made my tongue so deceitful ?
2. Puis quoi !... *Aller* mes vingt ans, si les autres *vont* vingt ans...
 V. : What of it... To go my twenty years, if others go their twenty years...
 C. : What of it ? *I shall go through with* my twenty years, if the others will go through with theirs.

4. For some of the terminology employed herein, I am indebted to J. Darbelnet and J.-P. Vinay, *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*, rev., London, George G. Harrap & Co., 1960, *passim*.

3. *Adieu chimères, idéals, erreurs !*

V. : Farewell chimeras, ideals, errors !

C. : Fancies, ideals, errors — *farewell !*

There being no apparent syntactic or phonological necessity for the displacement shown in the above examples, one can only conclude that it is for stylistic reasons alone that Cameron employs this linguistic device. The only advantage achieved, it would seem, is that the sentences become somewhat more dramatic in tone in that the main idea in each sentence appears at the end instead of at the beginning.

« Transposition », a movement from one part of speech to another, changes an element's grammatical category without, however, changing the basic meaning necessarily. It is used quite extensively by Cameron but only rarely by Varèse. There are, it will be seen, many kinds of possible transpositions : adverb/verb ; verb/noun/ noun/past participle ; verb/preposition/ past participle/noun ; adjective/noun ; adverb/adjective, and so on. The first of the following examples demonstrates the transposition of a verb in the original corpus into a noun in Cameron's translation. The second example displays the transition of a simple verb into a verb phrase, or from another point of view, the transition of a functive verb into a stative verb.

1. *la foi soulage, guide, guérit.*

V. : faith assuages, guides, restores.

C. : faith *is easement, guidance and healing.*

2. *Le monde marche !*

V. : The world marches on !

C. : The world *is on the march* —

3. *Satan, farceur, tu veux me dissoudre, avec tes charmes.*

V. : Satan, you fraud, you would dissolve me with your charms.

C. : Satan, you trickster, it's my *dissolution* you want, you with your charms.

In the last example, one notes that the verb is transposed into a noun, thereby losing some of the dynamic quality of the original statement yet perhaps being somewhat more satisfying from the point of view of English style and diction. Stating that the same semantic values can hide behind different parts of speech, Darbelnet and Vinay call transposition « ... *sans nul doute, le type de « passage » le plus fréquent auquel doit faire face le traducteur*⁵ ». It will be seen, moreover, that this particular stylistic mechanism is no more difficult for the translator to manipulate than the aforementioned ones, and can be extremely productive in the hands of a skilled interpreter.

« Modulation » is the term proposed by Darbelnet and Vinay to designate variations which are required when the passage from the source language to the target language cannot be made directly. This sort of variation, the last one which we shall discuss, is obtained in effect by changing the point of view or the conceptual base of the original. It is essentially a re-casting of thought, and is appropriate where literal translation, or even transposition, results in a phrase that is grammatically correct but which collides with the genius of the target language. As could be expected, Cameron makes full use of this stylistic device, while Varèse uses it but rarely. Consider the following excerpts :

5. J. Darbelnet and J.-P. Vinay, *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*, p. 96.

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. <i>Gagne la mort avec tous tes appétits...</i> | V. : Attain death with all your appetites... |
| | C. : <i>Carry with you to your death</i> all your appetites... |
| 2. <i>Vite ! est-il d'autres vies ?</i> | V. : Quick ! Are there other lives ? |
| | C. : Quick ! Are there other <i>ways of living</i> ? |
| 3. <i>Faiblesse ou force : te voilà, c'est la force.</i> | V. : Weakness or Strength : there you are, it's strength. |
| | C. : Weakness or Strength — <i>see, you stand for strength.</i> |

The conceptual base of the original has been changed in the above examples, resulting in a changed point of view or different metaphorical bases in the target language. As can be seen, a literal translation of lines such as these completely invalidates and destroys the effectiveness of the English version. Let it be said in passing that the ability to use modulation correctly is the mark of a sensitive and experienced translator, requiring an enormous amount of creativity, insight, and resourcefulness.

When all is said and done, Louise Varèse leaves much to be desired as a translator of Rimbaud. Translating too literally too much of the time, a procedure which gives a cold, stiff, lifeless tone to many of her lines, Mrs. Varèse is a timid translator who is apparently afraid of venturing too far from the individual words, which seem to have magnetized her.

Cameron, on the other hand, has not been afraid to enter creatively into his work. While remaining « faithful » not to the individual words of Rimbaud but rather to the spirit of what Rimbaud wrote, Cameron has, in clear, naturally-flowing English, recast Rimbaud's French phraseology and ideas into linguistic and conceptual configurations that are music to the ear, if one may be permitted such a subjective appraisal. Using quite freely the techniques of amplification, abridgement, transposition, displacement, and modulation, Cameron considers not only the individual word but also larger units of thought as well ; namely, the phrase, the clause, the paragraph. In short, he has bridged the intra-language gap successfully and poetically, and his interpretation is most certainly an act of poetry in itself.

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