

THE CREATIVITY OF TRANSLATION

AND

ITS UNIVERSALITY IN THE HERMENEUTIC PROCESS

This essay was originally published in *Essays in Memory of Aron Gurwitsch* and is here reprinted with the kind permission of the editor.

The creativity of translation? But every translator "knows he is not supposed to be creative. His job is to convey someone else's thought, feelings, and style, not his own." To be true to his text, he must always bear in mind "his servant's role to the intuition of others."¹ And so the underpaid, unsung and often unnoted translator has become the stereotypical underling in the world of letters. If he also finds himself in the halls of Academe, this lowly status is constantly impressed upon him by the attitudes of college deans and departmental personnel committees. After all, "it's only a translation."

And if he simply looks at his work routine, is the translator not forced to concede that his craft involves the most mechanical sort of facsimile work, the most plodding form of drudgery in thus "sticking to the text," where he is under compulsion to follow its sequence of sentences page after page to the bitter end? But is that all there is to it? Such a linear (or 'interlinear') and mechanically faithful sense of the translator's task has been the source of the most comic distortions of the text and the most mundane of translation errors on both the semantic and syntactic levels, as is indicated in the results of computer translation (e.g. with the ambiguities contained in sentences like "Time flies like an arrow") and the examples cited in standard manuals on translation (two favorite examples from diplomacy: "Nous demandons une explication" as politely "asking for" and not angrily "demanding" an explanation; mokusatsu in the Japanese response to America's surrender demand meant not "ignoring" the demand but "withholding comment pending a

¹ E. B. Ashton, "Translating Philosophie," *Delos VI* (1971): 16-29, esp. p. 25.

decision").² Translation has its holistic moments as well as its more obvious atomistic aspects. Sentence after sentence, countless minor and sometimes major decisions crop up, calling on the translator to raise his viewing altitude from the linear and take his bearings with regards to the whole, to review key words in their use, sense and impact within the larger contexts of paragraphs and chapters, forcing him not only to reword his sentences but also to grammatically and idiomatically rephrase the monstrosities that a literal translation yields. For what is being transposed is not an accumulation of words, each with its definite meaning, but a context meant to be reread as a context in another world. The Bible translator must keep in mind that his African readers have no sense of "as white as snow" and that the Eskimo has no real experience of mangers, millstones and camels passing through the eye of the needle. The publican who expressed his repentance by "beating his breast" (LUKE 18:13) if translated verbatim into Chokwe would really be "patting himself on the back" in self-congratulation, rather the "clubbing his head" in remorse.³ Here it is especially evident that word-for-word consistency must be abandoned in order to better convey the sense of the text. It would simply be wrong if it were not reworded. In other cases, the text would tend to lose its relevance if it were not reworded, say, from the archaic language of an old translation which sometimes 'shouts' to the point of drowning out the sense, at least for certain readers. In short, translation is fundamentally not a word-for-word process but more of a contextual location in time and space, in history and geography. It is a matter of finding the place where the text 'reaches' us, strikes home to us, pertains to us. It is a matter of finding the appropriate 'clearing' and the appropriate language in which and from which the text speaks to us.

Translation regarded in this way begins to lose its appearance of a seemingly slavish repetition and becomes more of a creative repetition calling on all the tact, boldness and ingenuity, say, when the

² Theodore Savory. *The Art of Translation*. (Boston: The Writer, 1968), pp. 182-184.

³ Eugene Nida. *Language, structure and Translation*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), p. 25.

dictionary offers no meaning to fit the sense of the word as used in this text, a common enough experience in philosophical literature, for example; tact, when he is faced with the task of smoothing out difficult passages. When he identifies the ambiguous and even opaque passages, does the translator really have the luxury of letting the difficulties stand through a purportedly 'literal' translation? After all, he is an interpreter: he must declare himself on how he understands them. In this area at least, the translator's task can be regarded as more difficult than that of the original author. He is the author's most exhaustive and critical reader, whose job is not only to understand but to explain every sentence of the text.

It thus becomes apparent that a translator is time and again confronted with a fundamental hermeneutic dilemma in his efforts to be faithful to a text in another language: What does it mean to strive for the same message when the codes are different? A profound ambivalence underlies the craft of the translator. His job is to bridge the gap between languages, to heal the open wound in the unity of language by creating a facsimile which would mitigate the multiplicity of Babel. But he recreates the original in another language, which is inescapably an alternative formulation and explicative rephrasing of that original. Related to the original as its approximate facsimile, the translation nonetheless by its very nature asserts its autonomy and independence over and above the original. Consider, for example, the disastrous results of retranslating a translation back into the original language. Then there are the translations which are better than the original and, more often than not, clearer than the original. The purist's cliché emphasizes that a translation is no substitute for the original, but it can equally be said that the original is no substitute for its translation. The translator's labor necessarily results in the creation of something new and different through his fusion of the horizons of two languages. For the original text, it means a new light coming from the other language being cast upon it. Since its subject matter comes to be understood in a new linguistic world, the original comes to be expressed in a new way. For the language receiving the original text, it means the assimilation of something new and different which often taps unsuspected resources in the native language and thus leads to an enrichment of its content of meaning and an expansion of its expressive capacity. The translator thereby becomes

the author of a new language and the creator of new stylistic values which enrich the imagery of his own language.

This possibility is often carried to extremes. The overriding response to the alienating strangeness of a foreign language may, in our desire to make the text contemporaneous in the familiarity of our own language, carry us toward an extremely colloquial rendering (the BIBLE in 'hip-talk'). Then there is the opposite school of translators which seeks, for example, to reconstruct "the very turn of each phrase in as Greek a fashion as English will bear," to the point of yielding an unreadable translation (Browning's or Humboldt's *Agamemnon*, Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin*).⁴ The optimum of creativity would reduce the 'semantic noise' to a bare minimum and seek the proportioning of the strange with the familiar, a right ratio of the far and the near, not a total levelling of the alien character of the original, but a translation which would retain the foreign and allow it to manifest itself in familiar language. It is like trying to find the right focal length, not too far, not too near, in order to maximize the facets of meaning, its fullest possible suggestive power. Here is the craft of translation at its subtlest and most difficult, where it is least understood and even less appreciated. It is even denigrated on this point. One speaks rather of a 'betrayal' of the original language and a 'prostitution' of the receiving language, or a 'compromise' between depth of penetration into the thought and felicity of expression.

Consider, for example, the median language being developed for the last several decades by the English translators of Heidegger. There are the irritants to the purists of English, like the capitalization of Being, the retention of Dasein as an 'English' word and the hyphenitis employed to make words speak from the roots of the language. There are the proven disasters which demand abrogation, like 'essent' for Seiendes and 'state of mind' for Befindlichkeit. There are the continuing experiments and so the potentially confusing translations, but perhaps also the beginning of a translation tradition, for paired terms like zuhanden (ready-to-hand, handy) and vorhanden (present-at-hand, on hand, extant, objectively present). There are the

⁴ Savory, op. cit., p. 64.

terms that continue to baffle: Brauch (custom, usage, behooving, handling process) for the hermeneutic relation of being to man; Bewandtnis (involvement, relevance, functionality, deployment, being-destined) for the being of the handy. There are the overlapping translations such as 'situation' or 'situatedness' for Bewandtnis, Befindlichkeit and Dasein. The latter is not surprising: Sidney Hook tells of how his account of the content of *Being and Time* prompted John Dewey to remark, "That sounds like my notion of the 'situation' in transcendental German." But of course the translator does not have the same freedom as the exegete embarked on an extensive paraphrase, since he is bound by a tight cluster of central terms and key concepts locked into the idiomatic structure of a language, and their focused translations must serve to illuminate the fixed body of sentences written by his author.

The Universality of Translation

There is a curious thesis coming out of 18th-century Germany that every act of speaking, reading and writing is at bottom an act of translation (Herder, A. W. Schlegel, Schleiermacher). All communication is translation, reformulation "in other words." Translation therefore occurs not only between languages but also within a single language. Interlingual translation is only the most extreme and conscious form of something which always occurs more or less spontaneously in any linguistic process. We speak of translating British into American English or perhaps a Southern accent into a New England idiom, but what about teaching freshmen philosophy or, from the other end, those freshmen struggling to 'digest' or master a difficult philosophical text? They are told to "try to put it into your own words," just as the translator proper, involved in what we have already called the most intensive and exhaustive form of reading, must always paraphrase. T. S. Kuhn has pointed to the role played by translation in overcoming the communication breakdown between scientists speaking from different paradigms,⁵ but George Steiner has done the same, in terms almost identical to

⁵ Thomas S. Kuhn. *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*. Second Edition, Enlarged. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 202 ff.

Kuhn's, with regard to a much more prevalent situation, the speech between the sexes, where communication breaks down because of "the differential use by men and women of identical words and grammatical constructs."⁶ Where there is difference in the linguistic field, there must be translation to overcome it or to mitigate it. And there is always difference in human communication, as is indicated in this simple formula of its structure: two human beings articulating themselves to one another. Add to this the differences not only of native language, but also of locality of origin, social class, outlook, generation and perhaps even epoch and one sees the possibility of expanding the term 'translation,' which properly refers to one form of cultural communication, to cover all forms of communication.

If one then notes that our two persons through long years of habituation can come to 'understand one another perfectly," one may want to call what takes place here a "confident, quasi-immediate translation."⁷ Or one may, as is more typical in philosophical hermeneutics, want to distinguish understanding from interpretation (i.e. translation), equating the former with what takes place in familiar habituation and the latter with the more conscious efforts to understand. The term 'translation' is thus reserved for the problems in understanding; it becomes the process which comes into play when our habitual and familiar understanding becomes problematic. Substituting 'translation' for 'interpretation' here underscores how essentially linguistic our problems in understanding become and in what way the process of restoring understanding is creative. For in translation, "language as the medium of understanding must be consciously created by an explicit mediation."⁸ For understanding communication occurs only within a common language, which is what two foreign speakers lack, and now, by analogy, quite often native speakers as well.

⁶ George Steiner. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. (New York: Seabury, 1975), p. 346.

In one of the most seminal of recent articles on translation, Roman Jakobson distinguishes not only interlingual and intralingual translation but also intersemiotic translation, the transmutation of verbal into non-verbal signs (e.g. pictorial, gestural, musical, mathematical). For we also speak of translation or 'creative interpretation' for what a film director or actor does to a script or a conductor does to a musical score. But more generally, following Peirce, Jakobson makes translation central to the theory of meaning. In language as we use it, "the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign, especially a sign 'in which it is more fully developed'." ⁹ Accordingly, all definition, description and explanation is translation, which is always expressed in 'other words' approximating the original words but which only very rarely are completely equivalent to the original. This gives an unfinished quality, an instability to any articulation of meaning which leaves it open to further alternatives. This "equivalence in difference," which we have already encountered in translation proper (as equivalent messages in different languages), "is the cardinal problem of language."¹⁰

What is it about language that constantly evokes the need for translation? If the formula 'equivalence in difference' touches the very nerve of language, it suggests two juxtaposed movements in the dynamics of language. If 'translation' is the comprehensive name for the move to overcome difference and restore unity and equivalence in language, is the tendency which prompts it, the move of differentiation and multiplication, equally prevalent and can it also be characterized in a comprehensive way? At first sight, the sources of difference seem endless. Behind the different languages, the dispersion of Babel, lie different times, places, outlooks down to the uniqueness of persons and their private languages. Undeterred by this

⁹ Roman Jakobson. "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," Reuben A Brower, ed., *On Translation*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), pp. 232-239, esp. pp. 232-233. The internally quoted phrase in this quote is from Peirce. Cf. Steiner, op. cit., pp. 260-261.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

complexity, Steiner,¹¹ in his study on language and translation, gives this aspect of language in a single name and calls this linguistic tendency 'alterity', the power and compulsion of language to 'alternate' on the real: to posit otherness, the 'other than the case,' what might have been (might still be), what can be or ought to be, what may never be, the impossible and contradictory, the counterfactual, the illusionary, deceptive, fictive and mythical, the playful pretence, etc. One can recognize in this formulation some older ways of talking about man's capacity of language: the remotion of abstraction, the power of transcendence, the power of 'de-realizing' the immediate, of absenting and distancing oneself from the given and so opening an 'empty' space of meaning (Husserl) or a clearing of possibilities (Heidegger).¹² Steiner identifies two distinct, though in

¹¹ Steiner, op. cit., p. 222 ff.

¹² The precedents can easily be multiplied and drawn not only from the phenomenological tradition. Kurt Goldstein's work with aphasiacs shows that their loss of the normal 'categorical attitude' ties the patients to the immediate situation, so that they can no longer imaginatively detach themselves from it and flexibly transpose themselves into 'as-if' situations, or even to free themselves from the immediate details of their situation and grasp it as a whole. Following Goldstein in part, Maurice Merleau-Ponty tries to show that the versatility characteristic of human 'symbolic behavior' is already manifest in the infant's mastery of the complex of bodily relations that enter into the mirror experience, where the ego-detachment which is part of the categorical attitude first shows itself. Contrast this with the amazing performances of Kohler's apes, for example, their inability to see the box at once as seat and as instrument for reaching, manifesting a temporally narrow range of the possible and an incapacity to analogize, or the chimpanzee's inability to translate itself fictively through its body image into a variety of points of view at once. Cf. my essay, "Aphasiology, Phenomenology of Perception and Shades of Structuralism," Erwin W. Strauss, ed., *Language and Language Disturbances*. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1974), pp. 201-233. in a related tradition, Suzanne K. Langer speaks of language as the power of "awareness of many things at once which are not all given together in experience, and the power of conceiving things and condition which do not exist at all. Our lives are always lived in a frame of possibility and conceptual assumptions which animals cannot share." The profoundest symbolic achievement differentiating man from the animals is his foreknowledge of death, that when it comes to dying, "one's own life is a case in point." Here, Langer throws a remarkable new light on the Heideggerian insight into the relation of language to Jemeinigkeit. Cf. Suzanne K. Langer, Philosophical Sketches (New York: Mentor Books, 1964), pp. 111, 99.

practice not always separate, thrust to this power of alterity and its way of multiplying language into languages private and cultural: on the one hand, the hermetic thrust of concealment of what is the case: deception, evasion, ambiguity, leaving things unsaid, willed opaqueness, half-truths and outright lying; on the other hand, the creative thrust of fantasy, fiction and invention. Each source of alienation, the privative and the novel, defect and excess of sense, in its way calls for hermeneutic decoding, unmasking, interpreting, translating into a fuller understanding. "Interpretation (translation) keeps the pressures of inventive excess from overwhelming and randomizing the medium. It limits the play of private intention, of plurality of meaning, at least at a rough and ready level of functional consensus... Translation mediates; it constrains the constant drive to dispersion." ¹³

But while translation "equates" texts and so unifies languages, this equation is never a reduction to a levelled uniformity. As an alternate recreation of the text, the translation in its way perpetuates "the constant drive to dispersion." This is particularly clear in the limiting case of translating poetry. For it is especially in its poetry that each language displays its unique and irreducible genius. The 'faithful translation' of a poem from one language to another can only be a "creative transposition" ¹⁴ from one unique phonemic code to another equally unique by way of semantic parallels which must tend toward the phonemic relationships proper to that particular language. In Valery's words, the poem is "this prolonged lingering between sound and sense" unique to each language.

The Translation of Creativity

The above suggests that the two movements, equation and unification through translation, multiplication and differentiation through creation, are indissolubly linked; they constitute the two interdependent movements in the transmission of a tradition. And if translation cannot be truly thought apart from creativity, perhaps

¹³ Ibid., pp. 281-282.

¹⁴ Jakobson, op. cit., p. 238.

creativity in turn cannot be thought apart from translation. Is the creative process itself modelled after translation? To what extent are the apparently conservative nature of translation and the revolutionary character of creativity one and the same process?

If we thus approach our opening issue from the other end, we may well find that no human creating begins in a void but rather always "draws on precedent, on canonic models so as to reduce the menacing emptiness which surrounds novelty."¹⁵ we begin to create from where we are, from what is already there, for example, from the so-called topoi, archetypes, genres and motifs of our culture.¹⁶ It is these cultural constants which are varied, reworded, paraphrased, parodied, collaged, countered and so transformed in a variety of creative ways. Creativity always has as its inverse side the element of precedent, of something already there which the creator translates into new forms. Thus the 'servant's' role played by the translator is also that of the creator. There is always a strain of femininity in the great creator, a submission to the presence of something transmitted to him in his particular, and in this sense new, context. It is this translational condition which Dadaism found so maddeningly oppressive.¹⁷ Yet in its declaration of independence from all precedents, in its attempt to escape its inherence in a historical context, Dadaism appealed to the topos of the unconscious, thus reaffirming that context and its 'feminine' relationship to it and underscoring the point that no statement starts completely new, no meaning come from a void. Creation is always appropriating re-creation, appropriation from its context and appropriate to that context.

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¹⁵ Steiner, *op. cit.*, p. 453.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 452.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 461.