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SOME CURRENT TRENDS IN TRANSLATION THEORY[1]

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The aim of this paper is to outline those trends in the theory of translation in recent years which seem to have been most productive in clarifying discussion of the priorities and practicalities of everyday work in translating. Such tendencies could derive from many fields. Since 1945, the theory of translation has been influenced by ideas stemming from linguistics, literary criticism, ethnography, communication theory, machine translation, psychology and philosophy (cf. the review in Nida 1974)—this contrasting with the pre-war situation, when translation tended to be restricted to the domains of the philologist, language teacher and professional interpreter. Indeed, attempts at a scientifically orientated theory of translation as such (as opposed to the practice and methodology of text translation) are extremely recent, as the contributions of Firth, Catford, Nida and others show. The dominant influences seem to have come from theoretical linguistics and anthropological linguistics in its broadest sense (i.e. subsuming ethnological and sociological studies of language); at present, there is increasing influence of ideas from psycholinguistics, but generalizations here would be premature. I shall therefore restrict myself to issues arising out of the former two areas.

The viewpoint of a general linguist is inevitably limited, by the nature of his calling, and certain topics, crucial to any evaluation of the practice of translation, fall outside of his competence. In the present connection, the following issues are outside my scope:

(i) problems of determining which original texts, editions, etc. to use;

(ii) determining the exact meaning of a source text;

(iii) the criteria for deciding on the choice of a text to use in a religious (e.g. pastoral, liturgical) context;

(iv) decisions as to which doctrinal or devotional tradition should be followed in formulating a translation policy;

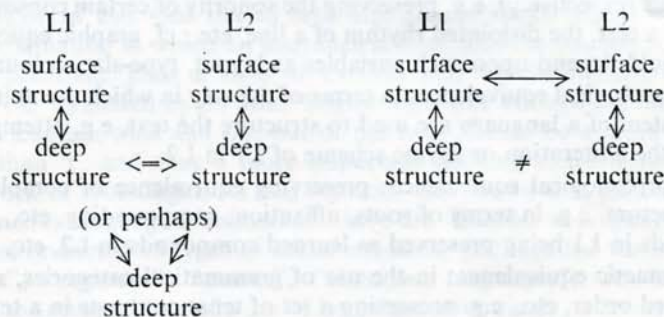(v) decisions about the aim of the translation, e.g. whether for scholarly, aesthetic, missionary, etc. purposes.

The insights of a general linguistic approach, by contrast, will relate to the following issues:

(i) Emphasizing the need for a *comprehensive* account of the translation process: see further below, but cf. the relativity of much of the recent discussion of liturgical translation, which focused on certain distinctive features of the proposed texts (such as *thou v. you, vouchsafe v. grant*), and largely ignored the pervasive and more fundamental significance of syntactic construction (see further Crystal and Davy, 1969: ch. 6).

(ii) Replacing the subjective language of description of the qualities of translation by a more objective metalanguage based upon the characteristics

of a text. For example, adjectives used to describe the desired quality of a translation, taken from recent correspondence on liturgical matters, included "sober" and "discreet": it is, however, difficult to see in what way such notions as linguistic sobriety might be defined. And in general, one would like to see a specification of translation variables in linguistic terms as well as in psychological or emotive terms.

(iii) Developing theories about the synchronic and diachronic relationships between languages—whether, for example, there is evidence to support the notion of a common "deep structure" for all languages (cf. eighteenth-century questions for "rational" languages, and of late Chomsky's emphasis on universals; cf. also Firth's criticism of such "naked ideas" theories in Palmer, 1972), or whether there are fundamental psycho-/socio-linguistic barriers separating different languages (the "deterministic" model of Humboldt, Sapir, Whorf; cf. for example, the excessive claims made for the uniqueness of Hebrew thought soundly criticized by Barr, 1961). The two possible models can be diagrammed as follows:

L1	L2	L1	L2
surface structure	surface structure	surface structure $\longleftrightarrow$	surface structure
$\Updownarrow$	$\Updownarrow$	$\Updownarrow$	$\Updownarrow$
deep structure	$<\!=\!>$ deep structure	deep structure	$\neq$ deep structure

(or perhaps)

$$\searrow \qquad \swarrow$$

deep
structure

The truth is probably somewhere in between.

(iv) Clarifying the notion of translation *equivalence*, or accuracy; see further below; and

(v) Clarifying the correlative notion of translation *acceptability*, the permitted tolerances of variation, along with the explication of such related concepts as the "level" of a translation; see further below.

The central task is to investigate the latter two issues, viz. the concept of an "acceptable translation". The dominant development in this respect seems to reflect very closely the movement of ideas within linguistics as a whole, namely, the replacement of outmoded,[2] simplistic and prescriptive concep-

[2] Traditional conceptions of translation, whose inadequacies are now generally recognized, would include that of "word-for-word" translation and "literal" translation (the distinction is essentially that the latter is grammatically acceptable, whereas the former rarely is; neither, however, need be meaningful: cf. *It's raining cats and dogs—Il est pleuvant chats et chiens—Il pleut des chats et des chiens*). Most modern conceptions work within the notion of "free" translation, this term not meaning "loose" or "inaccurate", merely that the unit of translation is a variable—sometimes the word, but more often the sentence, or some other major grammatical unit, as the starting-point. One is thus translating sense for pense: there is no necessary correspondence between any grammatical or vocabulary pattern in the two languages—though some general parallels will usually emerge, e.g. *il pleut à verse*.

tions of translational equivalence by a structured, dynamic and humble awareness of the complex reality of language structure and use. These adjectives, as they stand, are, however, opaque, and need clarification: one method of doing this is to illustrate what is meant by "complexity" in relation to the notion of translation equivalence.

(*A*) *Complexity in language structure.* Here the main influence has been to think in terms of "levels" (or "components") of language structure, each level having its own formal identity and unique function, conveying its own "meaning", which is an ingredient of the "total effect". The most widely recognized levels derive from the structuralist techniques of the 1930s–50s: phonetics (and, for the study of written language, graphics), phonology (graphology), morphology, syntax (these last two are sometimes subsumed under one heading, grammar), lexis, semantics. A brief example of each follows:

(i) phonetic equivalence: where there is an attempt to create auditory or articulatory equivalence between the sounds of source and target language (L1 and L2 respectively), e.g. preserving the sonority of certain consonants or vowels in a text, the disjointed rhythm of a line, etc.; cf. graphic equivalence, which would depend upon such variables as layout, type-size, colour, etc.

(ii) phonological equivalence: in terms of the way in which the units of the sound system of a language are used to structure the text, e.g. attempting to preserve the alliteration or rhyme scheme of L1 in L2.

(iii) morphological equivalence: preserving equivalence of complexity of word structure, e.g. in terms of roots, affixation, compounding, etc., learned compounds in L1 being preserved as learned compounds in L2, etc.

(iv) syntactic equivalence: in the use of grammatical categories, sentence types, word order, etc., e.g. preserving a set of tense contrasts in a text.

(v) lexical equivalence: between the meaning of the lexical items of L1 and L2 (idioms as well as words), this being defined in some precise way, e.g. in terms of semantic "components" (as in Nida, 1969) or meaning relations (as Lyons, 1968).

(vi) semantic equivalence: in terms of the overall meaning of the utterance, not solely in terms of its component lexical items, including, for example, whether there is an antithetical point being made, or a contradiction, or a metaphor (see further, Beekman and Callow, 1974; Nida, 1975).

This kind of analysis, with minor differences, may be found in the work of Firth and Halliday, and is explicitly related to translation theory by Catford. Other scholars have different views as to the optimum number of levels to recognize, and how they should be defined and interrelated. A separate level of "discourse" equivalence (viz. inter-sentence, or paragraph equivalence) is currently attracting interest, for example. But the basic insight remains: that an utterance's meaning is not a single homogeneous phenomenon, but a synthesis of various elements, the relative importance of which varies from one situation and language user to another, e.g. for one purpose, preserving alliterative patterns may be a major concern; for another, this factor may be unimportant. The important point to note is that these level equivalences are always to some degree mutually exclusive, e.g. phonological equivalence is

usually possible only with distortion of syntactic patterns (cf. the use of weird word-orders in hymns, in order to get the lines to rhyme). Total linguistic equivalence—in the sense of preserving equivalence at all levels—is therefore an impossibility. Lexical and semantic factors are usually permitted to outrank the others, but in certain contexts (usually literary or aesthetic) the other factors are regularly considered as having an important bearing on the finished work. The notion of levels has therefore more than merely theoretical importance. (In some languages, moreover, more attention is paid to the effect of certain levels than others, e.g. the use of onomatopoetic effects (phonetic sound symbolism), or the use of morphologically complex lexical items, or the use of certain patterns of word order: preserving the cultural values of these formal features is a regular problem for the translator.)

(B) *Complexity of language function.* The notion of equivalence involves not only correspondences between formal pattern and cognitive (i.e. referential, or denotative meaning), as outlined above, but also correspondence in the situation of use. One has to take into account both the *type* of extra-linguistic situation in which an utterance is used, and the *frequency* of its use in that situation. Thus a style of English may be distinguished by two features (X, Y) shared by no other English style (for example, in one kind of religious English, *thou* and *O*); but of the two, X may be a more frequent feature than Y, and thus a more important defining characteristic of the style. Work in sociolinguistics and stylistics has shown that the notion of a homogeneous language is chimerical: there are *variables* of language, rather, which are restricted to types of social situation, and labelled variously (e.g. "dialects", "registers", "genres", "restricted languages"). An important index of the acceptability of a use of language, accordingly, is its *appropriateness* to its situation. An utterance may be grammatically, semantically, and phonologically "correct", i.e. permissible, but inappropriate, e.g. formal language in an informal situation, and other antinomies, e.g. conservative *v.* radical, polite *v.* rude, technical *v.* expository, male *v.* female, metaphorical *v.* literal. The linguistic exponence of the various social and literary purposes available to a language-user is only now beginning to be studied, using sociolinguistic techniques, and the true complexity of the situation appreciated. Taking sociolinguistic equivalence into account in translation practice is, however, something which is rarely done systematically and accurately, in view of the absence of basic empirical information about the detail of social variation within and between languages. Fairly general categories are recognized (e.g. myth), but they are often restricted to a specific language background (e.g. Hebrew oral tradition) and we lack any general typology of discourse to use as a framework for establishing cross-cultural similarities. But the principle seems clear enough, even if work at present is inchoate and intuitive. Thus if a text is written in a very formal (archaic/metaphorical . . .) style, one would maintain a principle of stylistic equivalence by requiring that the L2 text should also be formal (archaic/metaphorical . . .). Note that I am here talking only about equivalence, not acceptability. If, after translating (say) a formal sixteenth-century liturgical

text into formal twentieth-century English, one does not like the result, then one is at liberty to change to a less formal style—but this would then no longer be a question of translation, in the usual sense, but of synchronic stylistic choice.

Other aspects of stylistic meaning have also been in the forefront of recent discussion, e.g. Leech, 1973. Of particular importance is the notion of institutionalized (as opposed to idiosyncratic) connotation, e.g. the "snarl" and "purr" words (to use Hayakawa's phrasing), which arouse opposed emotional reactions, e.g. "productivity" is (at present) a "good" word, "provincial" a "bad" one. The existence of such features, usually extremely culture-restricted, further complicates the notion of equivalence: their pervasiveness in language, moreover, has usually been much under-estimated.

Within this general area, *cultural* equivalence is sometimes distinguished separately from the above, being partly a semantic and partly a socio-linguistic matter. This refers to the use of linguistic terms, structures or sounds to evoke a highly specific cultural response, e.g. "bread" implies "staple diet" in L1 context as opposed to "rice" in L2, "fish" in L3, etc. This problem is central to any aim of dynamic, behavioural equivalence of texts, and it is of course a problem which has been well investigated by Nida, the Summer Institute of Linguistic groups, and others. A recent slant on this topic involves the notion of *presupposition*—what may be taken for granted in formulating an utterance, because one can assume knowledge of it on the part of the hearer. In terms of translation, the problem is that presuppositions are not always shared between L1 and L2, and one has to decide (to quote Nida, 1969) "How what is said fits into what is not said", and how much to add to the text for the L2 reader.

As with the question of formal equivalence, total functional equivalence would also seem to be a theoretical impossibility. From a scientific point of view, it seems impossible to verify the intuitions about language function and status held by the native bilingual (cf. the speculations of Steiner, 1975). It seems one must be satisfied with approximations, avoiding the most obvious blunders.

One point which emerges from the focus on the detail of language structure and function is the parallelism between translation in the sense of L1–L2, and that of L1–L1. L1–L1 translation may be seen both diachronically (e.g. rendering Elizabethan English into Modern English) and synchronically (e.g. rendering legal English into everyday English). The processes seem essentially the same, and the notion of "translation" has recently been applied with some cogency to the study of both—a point made, for example, by Firth, and now the keynote of Steiner, 1975. It is illustrated by the recent increase in Bible "translations" for restricted groups, such as Carl Burke's prison-orientated texts. The logic of this extension has one point in its favour: diachronically, the continuum L1–L1 leads ultimately to an L1–L2 relationship (e.g. English into Germanic). There is also one point against: synchronically, the notion of group varieties reduces ultimately to the language system of the individual (idiolect). In a sense, communication

between persons is also an act of translation, in that no two idiolects and sense experiences are identical. But here the notion of translation seems to have been broadened until it is indistinguishable from that of "communication", and its utility is questionable. The view is often defended, however.

It is evident that it is impossible to have total translational equivalence, in the full formal and functional senses of above, and this is of course not a novel conclusion. Its corollary is, however, less evident, if recent popular discussion of the nature of translation is anything to go by—namely, the fact that there are many legitimate translations of a particular text, depending on the emphasis the individual translator (or team) places on the separate variables. Instead of talking about the need for *an* acceptable translation, accordingly, one needs to think in terms of *kinds* of acceptable translations. There are many possible approximations to the idealized notion of a "best" translation, and the problem facing the translator is thus to make the alternatives as clear as possible, so that the users of the texts will be enabled to make a judicious and informed selection. It is this flexible and pragmatic attitude towards the acceptability of a translation that informs much recent academic thinking in this area. This emphasis is, however, at odds with the puristic normativeness which characterizes popular discussion on this topic, where prescriptions and proscriptions of the most unyielding (and uncharitable) kind abound. There are many stereotypes in general use relating to what an acceptable translation should be like, some of which have been part of our literary traditions for a very long time. Moreover, each culture has its own stereotypes; each language has its own hieratic varieties which have shaped its speakers' intuitions about prestige, propriety and correctness. Some cultures display more readiness for linguistic change, more tolerance of linguistic variability, than others. One of the most fundamental tasks facing the translator, therefore, is to understand the cultural attitudes which have given rise to such stereotypes, and to attack those which have led to inflexible ways of thinking. How this is best done is obscure, for the very existence of the problem has been but recently recognized. But now that it has, it is to be hoped that more informed discussion will take place.

What then are these stereotyped phrases and attitudes with which the notion of acceptability is in conflict? Here are some brief examples. The Roman Catholic International Committee on English in the Liturgy cites, as a criterion for an acceptable translation, the need to remember the tradition of English devotional writing. This means, for example, bearing in mind when certain linguistic formulae have been sanctioned by generations of usage so that they have achieved a favourite place, so to say, in the minds of the Church community. This point is an important one, but it is often ignored, as in the "thou/you" controversy. It is normally assumed here that the question of whether "thou" or "you" should be used will have a single answer; but this is most unlikely, as it ignores the issue of appropriateness in context. To argue that "thy" should be replaced by "your" in all contexts produces different degrees of acceptability in the results: for whereas it is relatively easy to persuade people to accept a change of pronoun from "thy" to "your" in a sentence like "I know thy name", it will be much more

difficult to effect a change in "thy kingdom come", the latter phrase having been hallowed by usage, so that it has become, in a sense, proverbial, resistant to change.

As a second example, consider the frequent references made to the "demands of corporate public worship", which it is said should influence the choice of liturgical style. But this notion is extremely obscure. It has sometimes been interpreted to mean that the language should avoid the use of specialist theological terms and archaisms. But what are such terms? Terms like "consubstantial" and "incarnate", which have been attacked, *look* complex, but it can readily be shown that there is no necessary connection between word length and conceptual difficulty. This links up with the demand in correspondence columns for "simplicity" of liturgical style, a stereotyped phrase which seems to mean "intelligibility without effort"— hardly a desirable precondition for intelligent liturgical participation! As has often been pointed out, liturgical language is not meant to be viewed as a self-contained set of utterances: the prayers need further explanation, which it is the function of other liturgical events, such as the homily, to perform. It is true that the language should be familiar, but this is not the same as saying it should be immediately comprehensible. "Blood of the covenant" may be obscure, but that is not because it is technical.

As a last example, it is often said that a translation of religious subject-matter should display "dignity", "consistency", "euphony"—but with little effort being made to determine exactly what such terms mean. What features of language constitute the physical correlates of "dignity" or "euphony"? The latter, for example, has been defined as language which is "suitable for praying aloud", "suitable for singing", or simply "beautiful" and "harmonious" (all these glosses are taken from recent introductions to liturgical translations). This last pair of glosses is impossible to turn to practical utility, for obvious reasons to do with the relativity of personal value-judgements. But even the first two definitions are difficult to make sense of. How does one decide what is suitable? What does one listen for, and who are the judges? Remember St. Benedict (in chapter 38 of his Rule): "The brethren are not to read or sing each in his turn, but only those who give edification to the hearers"!

These last paragraphs are an attempt to illustrate the complexity underlying some of the commonplace evaluative phrases used about the acceptability of a translation, phrases whose meaning has for too long been simply taken for granted. A careful investigation of their use is long overdue: it is easy to remain at cross-purposes without it, for example by agreeing to the use of a term without sharing its meaning. Readiness to look critically at the metalanguage of translation, I would argue, is a prerequisite for progress in this field; and there are now many indications that this critical attitude is developing among theoreticians and practitioners of translation. But above all, there is a need for a realistic awareness, on the part of translators, of the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic attitudes towards language (and thus, any translation) which predominate in the minds of his audience. There is little point in producing a fine, "professional" translation, if it clashes with

the expectations of the majority of the intended audience. The world is full of excellent, novel translations: what is lacking often is popular awareness of the need for them. Which suggests that, in order to bridge the gap between translation theory and practice, a new educational emphasis should develop, in much the same way that applied linguistics bridged the gap between linguistic theory and foreign language teaching, by spending many years in educating teachers to see the point of changing their techniques. Such a field —of "applied translation studies", perhaps?—would integrate psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic principles and techniques in order to evaluate the assumptions and attitudes of the translation consumer. I hope very much that the field will be invented before the end of the 1970s.

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