The Art
of
Translating
Poetry

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Preface

My first book on translation, *The Forked Tongue*, appeared almost twenty years ago. Its subtitle was "A Study of the Translation Process." This second book retains a practical orientation, especially in its second part, but is much more linguistic- and theory-oriented. To some degree this is the natural result of two decades of reading and reflection. But it is also a result of disquieting realizations about general knowledge in the literary field—and it is to that point that I want to address the bulk of these brief introductory remarks.

Academics are by nature specialists. Their training, their life's work as scholars, and their work as teachers all tend to reinforce specialization. But translation is by its very nature an interdisciplinary subject, whether one is practicing, theorizing about, or evaluating it. As I have argued elsewhere, and as I argue again in this book, the translator is (or should be) a literary person in the old-fashioned sense. The translator of poetry *must* be himself a poet, and the translator of literary prose is best able to do his job properly if he is himself a writer of literary (as opposed to scholarly or critical) prose. But the translator must also be something of a scholar. He

must know more than simply the language with which he works. He must be aware of literary and cultural history both in that language and in his own tongue. And as I argue in the first part of this book, he must also have some awareness of basic linguistic realities. He should also have thought about the act of translation, both practically and from some theoretical point of view. Anyone who comments on, and anyone who wants to make optimal use of, translations should have at least some knowledge in these same areas.

The real-life situation, however, is unfortunately that, while the best translators largely meet these expectations, most of those who comment on (scholars, critics) and almost all who use (academics) translations largely fail to meet them. Specialization is of course the key. Compartmentalized approaches lead to minds that are not only deeply habituated to a single perspective but also to minds that are inherently unaware even of the existence of other perspectives. As a result:

—most academics are virtually indifferent to literary quality in the translations they assign for student use; they not only see little or no difference between poetry translated into verse or into prose, but they seem usually to feel that prose translations of poetry are better (more "faithful")

—most academics know nothing of linguistics and see no reason to know anything, and even those who do know linguistics can see no application of their knowledge to translation(s).

These are not casual problems. Hosts of students who have had to struggle through, say, Dorothy Sayers's execrable rendering of Dante, or Elinor Marx Aveling's ghastly butchering of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, or any prose translation of *Beowulf*, regularly find themselves bored, irritated, and worst of all on the basis of these mis-translations are unable either to understand or to feel any sympathy with the critical and other judgments proffered by their teachers. A superb medievalist of my acquaintance, deeply learned in many languages and literatures and also in linguistics, was attracted to my recent version of Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain* but troubled about its suitability for a college honors course (limited to freshman students with an average SAT score of over 600). "Can they read it?" I was asked. I replied that I had read portions of the translation

to my then four-year-old daughter, and *she* had understood it without the slightest difficulty. I was (and am) quite confident that college students, and without any question high-ranking college students, would respond at least as well.

I have had more conversations like this than I care to remember. I have also seen scholars teaching courses on, say, the grammar of *Paradise Lost* without any reference whatever to linguistics. I have read elaborate studies of prosody which are similarly innocent of linguistics and assert, *inter alia*, that different languages have different sorts of prosodies because that's just the way it is.

In short, I have written this book to meet what seems to me an almost desperate need for some reasonably unified presentation of both the theoretical and linguistic and the practical aspects of translation. In dealing with translation practice I have however had to recognize that much of what I myself have to say has already been said in *The Forked Tongue*. And in dealing with the still more difficult problem of deciding at what level to write this book, especially its chapters on theoretical and linguistic matters, I have had to accept the fact that relatively few potential readers are likely to bring to their reading equivalent levels of knowledge in all the areas discussed. To those who are expert, accordingly, some of this book will at times seem perhaps unnecessarily elementary. To those who are not expert, some of this book will at times seem unnecessarily complex and demanding. I do not see any clear path through this difficulty. I hope the ad hoc solutions I have devised are at least not too disturbing to readers at either level.

Some amelioration may be available, too, through the following flowcharts. They are designed to codify and perhaps simplify the book's presentation: some readers may want to refer back to these charts at intervals.

Flowchart 1: *The nature of translation*

(1) language →

           → (3) original → (4) new language/ → (5) translation
               work   literature/culture

(2) literary history/ →
    cultural history

Flowchart 2: *Translation decision points*

(A) If the languages are in some way(s) related (*never* identical):

    (1) phonological resemblances: nature, extent

    (2) syntactical resemblances: nature, extent, reliability

    (3) lexical resemblances: nature, extent, history, reliability

(B) If the languages are *not* related:

    (1) importance of phonological considerations; possibility of devising partial equivalents

    (2) importance of syntactical considerations; difficulty of devising even partial equivalents

    (3) nonimportance of lexical considerations; literary translation is *not* verbal transposition; one does not translate words

Flowchart 3: *Decision points in translating forms/genres/prosodies*

(A) If comparable forms/genres/prosodies exist:

    (1) Are there comparable forms/genres/prosodies in both languages?

    (2) Are the histories of those forms/genres/prosodies similar?

    (3) Are the functions of the forms/genres/prosodies similar in both languages/cultures?

(B) If comparable forms/genres do *not* exist:

    (1) Are there forms/genres/prosodies in the new language which are in some central way(s) similar, though not fully similar?

    (2) Are there forms/genres/prosodies in the new language which at least have similar functions, if not similar natures/techniques?

    (3) Can a form/genre/prosody in the new language be adapted?

    (4) Can a form/genre/prosody in the new language be invented?

    (5) Must the form/genre/prosody be wholly or in part abandoned in the translation?

Acknowledgments

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Part One

Theory and Linguistics

I am very much in doubt whether Molbech in his translation of the Divina Commedia *has done wisely to use only feminine rhymes. If the Italian language had contained masculine rhymes, Dante would naturally have made use of them; and I do not see any sense when translating the work into Danish to burden the translation with a defect from which the Danish language does not suffer.*

—Henrik Ibsen, letter to Frederik Gjersten,
21 March 1872

1

The Specific Constraints of Language; the Unavoidable Linguistic Bases of Translation

The Specific Constraints of Language

There is no human society without some form of culture. "Culture," in this sense, is a basic aspect of human existence, a set of ways of living specific to a group of human beings and usually passed by them from generation to generation.

Language is one such pattern. Just as human culture can change, so too can human language. Neither culture as a whole nor the sub-aspect of culture which we call language is or ever has been a closed system. Neither cultures nor languages are immortal. The social grouping (tribe, nation) which has created cultures and languages can cease to exist, or the forces of change can operate so powerfully, and so fundamentally, that one culture gives way to another, one language is superseded by another.

In the long, largely unrecorded history of human language, we know of many such deaths and transformations. The Frankish tribes of Gaul, living under Roman rule, gave up their Germanic tongue

in favor of provincial Latin, and their form of Latin eventually became French.[1] The Egyptians gave up their original language, known as Egyptian, and entirely replaced it with Arabic. Under the rule of the Normans, beginning in 1066, the mass of Anglo-Saxon speakers in England did not completely abandon what we today call English, though many individuals among them did, but English was drastically and permanently changed by three hundred years of linguistic as well as military colonization. The number of English words of French origin is incredibly high, though we no longer think of such words as having been borrowed (or imposed).

Once people stop speaking a language we classify it as "dead," though the nature and existence and some of the records of the language may continue and, to some extent, be studied and even used by scholars and a few select others. Sanskrit is a "dead" language which is still employed by a small number of Hindu religious devotees; Latin is a "dead" language studied in schools and colleges, and still fairly widely read, though rarely spoken and no longer anyone's native tongue; Hebrew is a "dead" language which has become revivified.

Though they are not closed systems, languages *are* cultural systems, not in many ways much different from other patterns of social behavior. We correctly attach enormous importance to language. In its primary, spoken form it enables us to communicate both with others and with ourselves, for in addition to its vast role in our daily lives language also operates in our dreams and in our unconscious minds.

> Actually, thinking is most mysterious, and by far the greatest light upon it that we have is thrown by the study of language. This study shows that the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systemizations of his own language. . . . His thinking itself is in a language. . . . And every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types

of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness.

Brain research has made enormous progress since 1941, when Benjamin Lee Whorf wrote these words. But the central facts remain the same, at least for our purposes here. As Whorf goes on:

> In linguistic and mental phenomena, significant behavior. . . . [is] ruled by a specific system or organization, a "geometry" of form principles characteristic of each language. This organization is imposed from outside the narrow circle of the personal consciousness, making of that consciousness a mere puppet whose linguistic maneuverings are held in unsensed and unbreakable bonds of pattern.[2]

Plainly, the same is true as well of language in its secondary, written form (knowledge, information). Written language is not entirely identical to spoken language, but differs from the primary form only in less basic matters than those with which Whorf is dealing.

The evidence for this view of language as a cultural system, one which both reflects and in its turn shapes and even determines verbal expression (and the thought and feeling which underlie it), is not hard to come by. Since this book is being written in a Western language, let me make the point still more emphatic by choosing my most prominent examples from three non-Western tongues: Japanese, Chinese, and Indonesian.

Donald Keene writes:

> The sounds of Japanese are very simple. Each syllable generally consists of one consonant followed by one vowel. *The restricted number of possible sounds has inevitably meant that there are many homonyms in the language, and countless words contain within themselves other words or parts of words of quite unrelated meanings.* . . . From such a multiplicity of word associations evolved the *kake-kotoba*, or "pivot-word," one of the most distinctive features of Japanese verse. The function of the "pivot-word" is to link two different images by shifting