UMBERTO ECO

EXPERIENCES IN

TRANSLATION

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Translated by Alastair McEwen

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

Preface

Under the auspices of the Emilio Goggio Chair in Italian Studies, the Department of Italian Studies of the University of Toronto hosted, as the Emilio Goggio Visiting Professor in 1998, Umberto Eco, communications expert, medievalist, semiotician, and novelist, of the University of Bologna (Italy).

During his visit to the Department of Italian Studies, Professor Eco delivered a general public lecture entitled 'Books in the Next Millennium' at Hart House Theatre on 15 October 1998. He also presented a series of three specialized lectures on the topic 'Text and Translation.' These were held on 7, 9, and 13 October 1998 in the auditorium of the Claude Bissell Building of the Faculty of Information Studies before a capacity audience. The lectures form the basis of the essays published here under the title *Experiences in Translation*. They constitute the first volume of the Goggio Publications Series.

Sincere thanks go to the members of the Goggio family who, through their generous endowment, made the visit by Professor Eco, his lectures, and the publication of this new series possible.

Olga Zorzi Pugliese
Chair, Department of Italian Studies, and
Emilio Goggio Chair in Italian Studies

Introduction

This book is based on the Goggio Public Lectures I gave at the University of Toronto in 1998. This printed version also contains many examples I was unable to give during the lectures owing to lack of time. I have also organized the material differently so that the first part deals more with personal experiences in translation while the second part is more theoretical in nature. With respect to the Goggio Lectures, this second part has been enhanced by many considerations suggested to me in the course of the Seminars on Intersemiotic Translation held at the University of Bologna over the last two years.

It may seem strange that, rather than discuss my experiences in translation from the point of view of theoretical concepts, I deal with theory only after analysing these experiences. But, on the one hand, this decision reflects the way in which I arrived at certain theoretical explanations, and, on the other, I deliberately wanted to discuss my experiences in the light of a 'naïve' concept of translation.

Every sensible and rigorous theory of language shows that a perfect translation is an impossible dream. In spite of this, people translate. It is like the paradox of Achilles and the turtle. Theoretically speaking, Achilles should never reach the turtle. But in reality, he does. No rigorous philosophical approach to that paradox can underestimate the fact that, not just Achilles, but any one of us, could beat a turtle at the Olympic Games.

People translate during business conventions and during sessions of the United Nations, and, even though many misunderstandings can arise, people of different languages agree on the fact, let us say, that the shoes of brand X are less expensive than those of brand Y, or that Russians do not approve of the decision to bomb Serbia. The majority of Christians have read the Gospels in translation (every nation in a different language), but all of them believe that Jesus was crucified and John the Baptist beheaded, and not vice-versa. Many theories of language say that no text has only one sense, but when two or more copy editors in a publishing house check the translation of a novel (or of an essay) there are cases in which all of them decide that the translator ought to be fired because his or her translation is unacceptable. Once I had to edit the Italian translation of an English essay in which I read that, in the course of an experiment, 'l'ape riuscì a prendere la banana posta fuori dalla sua gabbia aiutandosi con un bastone,' that is, 'the bee used a stick to get hold of a banana put outside its cage.' Even before I checked against the original, I was sure that the translator was wrong: it was clear that the original English text spoke of an *ape* and that – since the Italian word *ape* means 'bee' – the translator thought that *ape* meant 'bee' in English too. Thus the first parameter to be applied in order to distinguish a good translation from a bad one is the one used by normal copy editors in normal publishing houses under normal circumstances – translations of poetry representing abnormal cases.

I apologize in advance for relying so much on common sense, but *common sense* is not necessarily a bad word. However, I also have taken into account many examples of abnormal cases.

Toronto, Milano, Bologna, 1998–2000

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EXPERIENCES IN TRANSLATION

Translating and Being Translated

It seems to me that studying translation is like studying bilingualism. Any study on bilingualism is primarily performed by observing the behaviour of a child exposed to two languages, and only continuous daily observation yields sufficient data on the development of a double linguistic competence. Now, some linguists have said that such observation is possible only if (i) one is a linguist, (ii) working with bilingual children, and (iii) prepared to follow their linguistic behaviour on a day-to-day basis from the earliest stages. This means that a reliable study on bilingualism could be made only by a parent who is a linguist married to a foreigner (preferably one interested in linguistic matters).

I think that a theory of translation should meet similar requirements. If translation studies are concerned with the process of translation from a source text A in a language Alpha to a target text B in a language Beta, then translation scholars should have had, at least once in their life, both the experience of translating and that of being translated (obviously into a language they know, so they can work in close cooperation with their translator).

It may be objected that one does not have to be a poet to elaborate a good theory of poetry, that people can appreciate a text in a foreign language in which they have only a passive competence, and that in order to enjoy opera it is not indispensable to be a tenor. But, in reality, even people who have never written a poem know how difficult it is to find a rhyme or to invent a metaphor, and even people who have only a passive competence in a language have experienced how difficult it is to utter well-formed sentences in it. I suppose that an opera-goer unable to sing in tune can understand from direct experience (maybe by trying in the morning, when shaving in front of the bathroom mirror) the skills required to produce a high C from the chest.

Active or passive experience in translation is not irrelevant for the formulation of theoretical reflections on the subject. In my

lectures, therefore, my primary aim is to consider certain problems that I have tried to solve, not as a translation theorist or as a semiotician interested in translation, but as a translated author and as a translator. Naturally, in reconsidering those experiences, I cannot avoid thinking like a semiotician, but this is only a secondary aspect of my lectures.

I have always avoided playing my two roles as semiotician and novelist at the same time. When I speak in public about my novels, and this is very seldom indeed, I do not talk about semiotics, and when I lecture on semiotics I never make references to my novels, for the double reason that nobody can be a good critic of himself or herself and that novelists, as well as poets, should never provide interpretations of their own work. As I have repeatedly stated (Eco 1979, 1990, 1994), a text is a machine conceived for eliciting interpretations. When one has a text to question, it is irrelevant to ask the author. But making some remarks about my experience as a translated author does not mean providing either a critical evaluation or a global interpretation of my work. I shall use myself only as a privileged witness on very marginal problems, always with regard to the choice of a word or the way to interpret a sentence.

In my novel *Foucault's Pendulum* there is, at a certain moment, the following dialogue (I have simplified matters by putting the names of the speakers at the beginning, as in a theatrical text):

> Diotallevi – Dio ha creato il mondo parlando, mica ha mandato un telegramma.
> Belbo – Fiat lux, stop. Segue lettera.
> Casaubon – Ai Tessalonicesi, immagino.

This is a piece of sophomore humour, a handy way of representing the characters' mental style. The French and German translators, for instance, had no problems:

Diotallevi – Dieu a créé le monde en parlant, que l'on sache il n'a pas envoyé un télégramme.
Belbo – Fiat Lux, stop. Lettre suit.
Casaubon – Aux Thessaloniciens, j'imagine. (*Schifano*)

Diotallevi – Gott schuft die Welt, indem er sprach. Er hat kein Telegramm geschickt.
Belbo – Fiat lux. Stop. Brief folgt.
Casaubon – Vermutlich an die Thessalonicher. (*Kroeber*)

A literal translation in English would be:

Diotallevi – God created the world by speaking. He didn't send a telegram.
Belbo – Fiat lux, stop. Letter follows.
Casaubon – To the Thessalonians, I guess.

William Weaver, the English translator of *Foucault's Pendulum*, realized that this exchange hinges on the word *lettera*, which is used in Italian both for mailed missives and the messages of Saint Paul (the same applies in French) – while in English the former are *letters* and the latter *epistles*. This is why, together with the translator, I decided to alter the dialogue and to reassign the responsibility for that witticism:

Diotallevi – God created the world by speaking. He didn't send a telegram.
Belbo – Fiat Lux, stop.
Casaubon – Epistle follows.

Here, Casaubon takes on the double task of making the letter-telegram pun and the reference to Saint Paul at the same time. In

Italian, the play was on two homonyms (the reference to Paul had to be inferred from the double sense of the explicit word *lettera*); in English, it is on synonyms (the reference to the current formula in telegrams had to be inferred from a quasi-explicit reference to Paul and from the weak synonymy between epistle and letter).

Can we say that this is a faithful translation of my text? Note that the English version of the exchange is snappier than the Italian, and perhaps some day, on making a revised edition of my novel, I might use the English formula for the Italian original too. Would we then say that I have changed my text? We certainly would. Thus the English version is not a translation of the Italian. In spite of this, the English text says exactly what I wanted to say, that is, that my three characters were joking on serious matters – and a literal translation would have made the joke less perspicuous.[1]

The above translation can be defined as 'faithful,' but it is certainly not literal. One can say that, in spite of the literal meaning, it has preserved the 'sense' of the text. What is a 'sense' that does not correspond to the literal meaning? Does such a sense depend on the lexical meaning of the single words or on the meaning of a sentence? Moreover, the question does not seem to be only a grammatical one. We are dealing with a 'faithful' translation even though it also looks referentially false: the original Italian text says that Casaubon said *p* while the English text says that Casaubon said *q*. Can a translation preserve the sense of a text by changing its reference?

One could say that a good translation is not concerned with the denotation but with the connotation of words: the word *cool*, in English, denotes a physical state but in the idiom *keep cool* connotes a psychological one, so that a correct Italian translation should not be *rimani freddo* but rather *sta' calmo*. If we take 'connotation' in Barthes's sense (Barthes 1964), Weaver certainly preserved the moral or ideological connotations of the Italian original. But Weaver was

also duty-bound to preserve many denotations of the original sentences: 'Dio ha creato il mondo' says that it is the case that a divine entity brought this universe into being, and no reasonable person could say that 'The Devil created the world' or 'God did not create the world' would be acceptable translations.

The word *connotation* is an umbrella term used to name many, many kinds of non-literal senses of a word, of a sentence, or of a whole text. That words, sentences, and texts usually convey more than their literal sense is a commonly accepted phenomenon, but the problems are (i) how many secondary senses can be conveyed by a linguistic expression, and (ii) which ones a translation should preserve at all costs.

Since the questions I have just listed are fundamental for every responsible reflection on translation, let me try to answer some of them from the point of view of my personal experience.

EQUIVALENCE IN MEANING

Equivalence in meaning cannot be taken as a satisfactory criterion for a correct translation, first of all because in order to define the still undefined notion of translation one would have to employ a notion as obscure as equivalence of meaning, and some people think that meaning is that which remains unchanged in the process of translation. We cannot even accept the naïve idea that equivalence in meaning is provided by synonymy, since it is commonly accepted that there are no complete synonyms in language. *Father* is not a synonym for *daddy*, *daddy* is not a synonym for *papà*, and *père* is not a synonym for *padre* (otherwise Balzac's *Le père Goriot* would be translated in Italian as *Il padre Goriot*, while it is more correct to translate it as *Papà Goriot* – but not in English as *Daddy Goriot* – and some English translations prefer to keep the French title *Père Goriot*).

Faced with all these problems, the first and easiest answer is that, in spite of much philosophical speculation, while there is not absolute synonymy for lexical items, different sentences in different languages can express the same proposition. What is the criterion for stating that two sentences in two different languages convey the same proposition? In order to realize that the sentences *Il pleut*, *It's raining*, *Piove*, and *Es regnet* express the same proposition, we ought to be able to express the constant proposition in a sort of metalanguage. Such a metalanguage would meet the requirements of that Perfect or Adamic or Universal language that so many have dreamt of over the centuries (see Eco 1993).

Such a perfect language can be thought of either in a mere mystical sense, or in a logical one. From the mystical point of view, Walter Benjamin (1923) said that translation implies a pure language, a *reine Sprache*. Since the translated text can never reproduce the meaning of the original, we have to rely on the feeling that all languages somehow converge. All languages – each taken as a whole – intend one and the same thing, which, however, is not accessible to any one of them but only to the totality of their mutually complementary intentions: 'If there is a language of truth, in which the final secrets that draw the effort of all thinking are held in silent repose, then this language of truth is true language. And it is precisely this language – to glimpse or describe it is the only perfection the philosopher can hope for – that is concealed, intensively, in translations.' But such a *reine Sprache* is not a language. Bearing in mind the cabalistic and mystical sources of Benjamin's thought (see Steiner 1975: 65), we can perceive the looming shadow of Sacred Languages, something similar to the secret Pentecostal gift. As Derrida (1985) said in his commentary on Benjamin: 'Translation, the desire for translation, is not thinkable without this correspondence with a thought of God.'

Now, it is beneficial for a translator to think that his or her desire