The Art of Translating Prose

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Preface

Like *The Art of Translating Poetry* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), this book stems from my practical work as a translator and also from my concern to bring linguistic considerations, both practical and theoretical, to bear on the art of translation. As I said in the preface to that earlier study, "I have written this book to meet what seems to me an almost desperate need for some reasonably unified presentation of . . . the theoretical and linguistic and the practical aspects of translation." In essence, *The Art of Translating Poetry* argued that

1. No two languages having the same phonology, it is impossible to re-create the sounds of a work composed in one language in another language.
2. No two languages having the same syntactic structures, it is impossible to re-create the syntax of a work composed in one language in another language.
3. No two languages having the same vocabulary, it is impossible to re-create the vocabulary of a work composed in one language in another language.
4. No two languages having the same literary history, it is impossible to re-create the literary forms of one culture in the language and literary culture of another.
5. No two languages having the same prosody, it is impossible to re-create the prosody of a literary work composed in one language in another language.

These arguments, which perhaps sound overwhelmingly negative, take a good deal of their impetus from the *facts* of poetic translation. When it is attempted at all (that is, when translator and publisher do not combine

to abandon all hope of transmitting one language's poetry as poetry in some new language, and therefore turn the quicksilver of verse into plodding prose), poetic translation frequently tries to translate what cannot be translated—rhymes, meters, forms—and ends, in the name of that will-o-the-wisp, "faithfulness," by stifling poetic vitality. In its theoretical as well as in its practical pages, *The Art of Translating Poetry* argues in favor of re-creation and approximation, rather than any struggle for a "literal" and "exact" reproduction, for all too often that struggle to preserve bones and skeletons succeeds in creating no more than a charmless, fleshless museum mounting.

But prose is a very different matter, with a very different history and, though not many of either its translators or its readers seem to know this, a very different linguistic nature. The translation of prose is therefore an exceedingly different business—and the usual *facts* of *its* practice are, once again, in largely direct opposition to controlling linguistic and literary realities. Translators of poetry (when, that is, they attempt poetic translations) are apt to squeeze their work into straitjackets, into largely outdated corsets and whalebones. The informed commentator on poetic translation thus needs to be an advocate not for license but for a spirited and intelligent relaxation. But translators of prose tend to be unaware that their originals have anything but a semantic existence. They translate "meaning" in its narrowest verbal sense—pretty much word-by-word. But as a close examination of the structures of prose reveals, it is by its very nature woven much closer to the syntactic bone than is poetry. Indeed, although poetry regularly and with gay impunity violates its language's syntax, prose cannot tolerate either such an intensity of syntactic irregularity or such far-ranging violations. What is part of the very woof and warp of verse is, in a word, death to prose—because prose that plays fast and loose with syntax is either bad prose, incomprehensible prose, "poetic" prose, or no prose at all, rolling completely off one definitional table and dropping onto another. The "prose poem" has become a recognized form in its own right, nor do I have any quarrel with it. (I have written some myself.) But prose cannot be adequately translated without close attention to its inner structures: for proper prose translation the necessary and desirable freedoms of the poetic translator must be curbed, for the basic component of prose style, as well as an important aspect of prose significance (meaning), turns out to be syntax.

The fundamental argument of *The Art of Translating Prose,* accordingly, is that proper translation of prose style is absolutely essential to proper translation of prose, and close attention to prose syntax is absolutely essential to proper translation of prose style. In literary prose, the style *is* the man (or the woman), the very sign and hallmark of the mind and

personality at work on the page before us. In the translation of prose, therefore, to ignore or to maltreat style is to fail even before you begin.

This book develops that argument, fleshes it out with a host of examples,[1] and traces much of its history and its consequences—chief among which is the sad fact that few translators of prose, and even fewer readers, seem to have advanced much beyond Molière's "bourgeois gentilhomme," Monsieur Jourdain, and the Maître de Philosophie who instructs him. "Tout ce qui n'est point prose est vers," says the man of learning, "et tout ce qui n'est point vers est prose" ("Everything that's definitely not prose is poetry, and everything that's definitely not poetry is prose"). The conclusion that Monsieur Jourdain draws from this cheerfully circular definition is still, I suspect, the one that most people would unthinkingly (and mistakenly) draw, namely, that "il y a plus de quarante ans que je dis de la prose sans que j'en susse rien" ("I've been speaking prose for more than forty years and never known I was doing it").[2]

If only it were truly that easy!

1. See the Appendix for a brief discussion of how the various examples were selected.
2. Molière, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme,* II.iv.

Contents

PART

1

Tracking Syntactic Movement

Tain't what a man sez, but wot he *means* that the traducer has got to bring over.

—Ezra Pound

1

The Linguistics of Prose Versus the Linguistics of Verse

This being a study of translation *into* English, let me begin with an exercise based on translation *from* English. Suppose a document beginning with the nominal phrase, "The Internal Revenue Service . . . " The verb comes next; we stop before it appears, but as speakers and readers of the language we of course remain aware, without knowing what specific verb the document will employ, that something which does what verbs do in English is not only on its way but very likely to appear immediately: "the IRS objects, the IRS says, the IRS may feel," and so on. That is, not surprisingly, not only does syntax create structure, but long experience of the incessant repetition of structure (which is another way of saying "language acquisition") creates individual subjective expectations. Cultural patterns, in short, if not fully predictable, do at least tend strongly toward their own self-fulfillment. In English, the appearance of a nominal phrase tends to create the expectation that a verb will appear next, and that expectation tends to create its own satisfaction. A very high percentage of the time, the verb *is* what does in fact appear next.

And that the verb's immediate appearance is a broadly cultural phenomenon (that is, it is system-driven; in this case the system is syntactic) rather than a narrowly verbal one becomes plain when we consider "The Internal Revenue Service" as if it were nothing more than a mere assem-

blage of words. I have just pulled off my shelf the best and certainly the most linguistically oriented desk dictionary the United States has ever produced, the Random House *American College Dictionary.* This marvelously accurate reference (now out of print) defines the three principal words in our phrase as follows (I will not comment on the linguistic role of the particle "the," this being a book about translation and not an elementary linguistics text):

internal = "situated or existing in the interior of something"
revenue = "the income of a government" or, more broadly, "the return or yield from any kind of property; income."
service (noun form) = "an act of helpful activity"

Suppose a translator who knew (from whatever source) the *words* of the phrase, but not the cultural context that in fact shapes their meaning. He or she might understand "The Internal Revenue Service" as referring to some helpful government activity having to do with purely domestic—that is, *in*ternal as opposed to *ex*ternal—income. This would be fairly close to, but by no means exactly the right meaning. Americans do not associate the Internal Revenue Service with anything "helpful," nor does the IRS limit itself to domestic income.

Clearly, words alone do not carry meaning—or, at least, do not carry *enough* meaning. And, equally plainly, the more idiomatic (that is, the more culturally rather than verbally shaped) the phrase, the truer this becomes: "manger son blé en herbe," which if understood as a mere sequence of words seems to mean "to eat one's wheat in the blade" (which does not mean anything very much), is of course a French expression meaning "to spend one's income before one actually receives it."

If our phrase, "the Internal Revenue Service," occurred in a British rather than an American context, it would be transformed into "The *Inland* Revenue *Office*," and the culturally uninformed translator's problems would center around "inland" ("away from the coast") rather than "internal," and around "Office" as opposed to "Service." In French the relevant term would be ***recettes fiscales*** (tax receipts; so too in Italian the phrase is ***revenue fisco***); in German it would be ***Staatseinkünfte*** (government income); in Dutch, ***de fiscus revenue*** (treasury revenue); in Spanish, ***Delegación de Contribuciones*** (tax office); in Indonesian, ***Kantor pajak*** (again, tax office; the loan word ***kantor***—borrowed from Dutch—is worth noting). It is not hard to see, and seems unnecessary to trace, the small but important differences that occur as we move from one language's way of talking about tax collectors to the next language's way; cultural

and linguistic historians properly make much of such differences, for they are ripe with cultural and linguistic significance(s) of which the translator needs, when he can, to be aware.

Culture (that is, system) is thus operating on our nominal phrase in two principal directions: first, as syntax, it shapes word order and sequence, and thus the basic movement of the language; and second, as lexicon, it shapes the meanings of words and phrases. Both directions are in operation at the same time, with approximately equal force; in prose as in speech neither does or can operate without the other; and both are among the variable elements that individual writers (or speakers) manipulate to form their prose (or speech) style. Style itself of course takes on meaning as well: once we know A's style, B's style of and by itself communicates to us, quite apart from B's lexicon or syntax, some of the ways in which B himself is unlike A. But style depends on, is indeed inter alia composed of, variable aspects of syntax and lexicon.

Of course, the same can be said of verse—but the proportionate importance of lexicon as opposed to syntax is different in the two forms, so that the dimensions and also the meaning of style are likely not to be the same in verse and in prose. "The Internal Revenue Service reports that tax receipts are somewhat smaller this year than during the same period in any of the three previous years." This would be one among the myriad possible complete forms of an English-language sentence beginning with our phrase—a sentence in prose, that is, for in verse neither sentences nor syntax in general have anything like as much significance.

Be gentle with oranges, this year:
The IRS hasn't left them much juice.

Emphasis naturally falls, in this just-concocted poetic counterpart to the hypothetical prose statement, above, on "oranges" in line 1 and on "juice" in line 2. But "oranges/juice" is not a sequence dependent on syntax (neither are poetic lines dependent on, though they may follow the shape of, syntax: poetic lineation is frequently rhetorical or musical, or even visual and spatial, rather than simply syntactic). If we use terms like "declarative" and "interrogative" to categorize prose sentences, what terms do we choose to describe "oranges/juice"? "Evocative"? "Image-carrying"? It does not matter, nor am I concerned to develop a new critical vocabulary. The linguistic frameworks of poetry and prose are obviously dissimilar.

And if we make the poetic sample even more "poetic," by employing more poetic devices, the dissimilarity between the two frameworks becomes still more pronounced:

Be gentle with oranges, this year:
It isn't bruises they fear
But the tax man's craving for juice.

Adding rhyme to our concocted poetic bit, plus a metrical pattern, almost necessarily takes us still further from the dominance of syntax. There is (or should be) no surprise in this, for:

1. Poetry, as compared to prose, generally places greater emphasis on the *sound of language,* on its music and rhythm, and also employs a greater intensity of verbal colors of all sorts.
2. Poetry, as compared to prose, lays diminished emphasis on literal, linear *significance* and relies far more on metaphor and other indirect ways of meaning.

There are ranges of operation, to be sure, and some prose becomes "poetic," just as some poetry becomes "prosaic." (It is worth noting that both adjectives tend to be pejorative, though "prosaic verse" is more negative than "poetic prose," the latter sometimes being meant as praise rather than censure.) But prose comes closer to poetry precisely when it (a) takes on aspects of poetic expression not usual to it and (b) when it correspondingly gives up some of its syntax-based linearity. "... A stone, a leaf, an unfound door; of a stone, a leaf, a door.... O lost, and by the wind, grieved, ghost, come back again." This epigraph to Thomas Wolfe's novel, *Look Homeward, Angel,* is therein printed (in italics, and just before the start of chapter 1) as prose. It has however been reprinted (though not by its author) as poetry, and it clearly is more poetic, as it is also plainly less syntax-based, than usual prose. Alexander Pope's poetry just as plainly relies more on direct (and therefore more syntax-based) statement than do most other poetic corpuses: we are not startled to have Pope writing "An Essay on Criticism" or "An Essay on Man," though "essay" is a term we associate with prose, and we are not startled when the former poem begins " 'Tis hard to say, if greater want of skill / Appear in *writing* or in *judging* ill" and the latter begins "Awake, my St. John! leave all meaner things / To low ambition, and the pride of kings." And we are startled neither when Matthew Arnold begins his "The Scholar Gipsy" with a much less direct "Go, for they call you, shepherd, from the hill" nor when he begins his "Callicles' Song" (from "Empedocles on Etna") with an emphatic and unnatural inversion of English syntax: "Through the black, rushing smoke-bursts, / Thick breaks the red flame...." As Arnold assures us, logically enough, "Though they may write in verse, though they may in a certain sense be masters of the art of versification,

Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose." His rationale is even more to the point: Dryden and Pope's work is the poetry "of an age of prose and reason."[1] Arnold may not be our best guide to Alexander Pope, but he knows what goes with what: prose goes with reason, with order, with—in a word—syntax.

And the historical evidence strongly supports this view of the differences between poetry and prose. Every human culture of which we have any record, whether it be living or dead, has developed poetry. Poetry thus has a strong link with oral expression, since by definition every human culture has language and the primary form of language is speech. Not all human cultures, however, develop prose; only cultures (and languages) that develop a written subset of the spoken language can be said, again by definition, to have begun the long process of developing prose. Without exception, those cultures which do develop writing, and then develop prose, always evolve prose later than poetry and, further, find that the prose of their particular language attains heights of literary excellence (high-order clarity, as well as high levels of aesthetic accomplishment) later still. In the history of English, for example, writing was a borrowed skill, transmitted initially by the conquering Romans and perpetuated by the Church, but even without the necessity of evolving a written form entirely on its own, English did not reach consistently high levels of prose for almost a millennium. The Angles and Saxons and Jutes who occupied and transformed Celtic Britain brought poetry with them; there are some surviving Old English (or Anglo-Saxon: the terms are interchangeable) poems that might be datable as early as the seventh century A.D.; but English prose does not reach its literary peak until the fifteenth century and Sir Thomas Malory. Geoffrey Chaucer, a very great poet, is also the possessor of a singularly lame prose style.[2] Thus, except when it is used to present poetry, or to record actual speech, and the like, prose may logically and conveniently be defined as the written form of a language.

In our era, certainly, English prose has had more than enough time to evolve distinctly different conventions for such matters as indicating the end of a sentence (or what we call in speech an "utterance"), which in prose is signaled by a punctuation sign called a period but in speech is signaled, most usually, by a terminal juncture and a fairly large drop in pitch (and usually in volume as well). Like the prose of other languages, though in its own individual way(s), English prose has also developed its

1. Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," in *Essays in Criticism, Second Series* (London: Macmillan, 1888), 41, 42.

2. See Burton Raffel, "English Prose for the English Novel: The Beginnings," *Thought* 59 (December 1984): 402-18.

own set of important conventions, as necessary to written language as they are unnecessary in speech, such as capitalization, underlining, a whole range of punctuation signals, italics, and so on. And over the centuries of its development and use, though once again the fact is not generally understood, like the prose of other languages our English prose has settled on a vocabulary suited to its various needs as well as a syntax significantly different from that of speech. Thus, an excessively "bookish" person is said to and in fact does "speak like a book"—that is, to use a lexicon and generally to organize the language in ways inappropriate for speech but perfectly acceptable on the printed page. As a practicing attorney, I once heard a tax law specialist speaking on the telephone and wanting to find out whether the person at the other end had begun to look into some particular matter, actually say "Have you commenced to endeavor to ascertain whether . . . " This is not the lexicon of speech; there are native speakers of English to whom, though spoken clearly and plainly, words like these would be more or less incomprehensible. Because I wanted to verify the quotation from *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme,* cited in the final paragraph of the preface to this book, I happen to have on my desk a volume of Molière's plays that features a condensed biography of that writer. The first paragraph of that brief biography contains the following sentence (which it would seem exceedingly strange to term an "utterance," for what manner of man or woman would ever actually utter it?):

> [The] salient facts in Molière's biography are that he was a seventeenth-century, Parisian bourgeois, with all that that position and inheritance imply in the way of common sense, love of work, love of family, clear judgment, and sober Epicureanism; that he received the best sort of training for a social satirist in his formal education and in his opportunities for the observation of all classes of society; and that he was able to serve a long apprenticeship as an actor and as an author in order to develop his dramatic technique.[3]

Nor is it any secret that millions of native speakers of English, though perfectly competent to say anything they need and choose to say, cannot make acceptable use of the language's written form, almost invariably for lack of the practical experience with that form which those who read a great deal acquire automatically. As prose almost always does, the written

3. *The Principal Comedies of Molière,* ed. F. K. Turgeon and A. C. Gilligan (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 1.

subset of English has become sufficiently unlike the basic spoken form(s) that functional acquisition of the written subset of our language must take place separately from and independently of functional acquisition of the spoken form(s). The capacity to use (write) and to understand (read) written English is thus no more guaranteed to native *speakers* of the language than the capacity to use and to understand German is guaranteed to native speakers of French. In a sense, accordingly (though the metaphor must be recognized as a metaphor and not pushed too hard), those who have by reading made themselves proficient in the written form(s) of English are practicing, when they read and also when they write, a sort of "translation," a transfer from one language to another. Just as a native speaker of English "studies" (or otherwise arranges for the acquisition of) German or French, so too the native *speaker* of English is no more automatically a native *reader* and *writer* of English than the native speaker of any language is automatically a native reader and writer of that language. The ideal way to learn another language is to spend time in places where that other language is used: France, for French; Germany, for German; and so on. The place where that different form of the language known as prose is used is, *tout court,* the written form—which means, most usually, newspapers, magazines, and books. And the person who spends time with newspapers, magazines, and books is usually occupied in reading.

To capture (translate) the written form (prose) of one language in the written form (prose) of another language is thus in distinct and absolutely inherent ways different from capturing (translating) the spoken (or the poetic) form. As re-creation of prose, translation is necessarily subject to all the differing conditions to which original prose is subject: as a purely linguistic phenomenon, translation differs from original creation only in its origins, not in its nature. Origins, that is, play immensely important roles in outcomes; the process of re-creating prose is exceedingly different from the process of creating prose *ab initio.* But as a linguistic outcome, the translation that is the end result of that different process is, again, shaped by and obedient to the same linguistic forces which shape and regulate any other prose in that same language, exactly as is the translation which is the end result of the re-creation of poetry in some other language. The linguistic forces themselves are different; their suzerainty is however the same. No translator of prose is or can be any more invulnerable to those linguistic forces than is the translator of poetry.

"That linguistic anarchy has its uses," says Walter Nash, "there is no doubt; and we have ingenious advocates for it, in the guise of specially-accredited persons enjoying a traditionally honoured privilege of living

both inside and outside the [social] contract. Some of these inside-outsiders," he points out, "are comedians, clowns." But the poet, "too, is the outsider on the inside, the anarchist who relies on the conventions." And Nash then sets out, without any intention of exhausting the list, what seem to him the central aspects of the poet's "linguistic anarchy":

> He may take cavalier liberties with the syntax of the language, though he never pursues liberty to the point of total disorder; he proclaims, through word-play, image, and metaphor, his right to reassess the values of the lexicon; he may even triumphantly assert his privileged status with some turn of language that directly challenges one or other of the "terms" of our unwritten [social] contract.[4]

There is nothing startling or even new in this formulation. As Roman Jakobson wrote in 1935, "The essence of poetic figures of speech does not simply lie in their recording the manifold relationships between things, but also in the way they dislocate familiar relationships. The more strained the role of the metaphor in a given poetic structure, that much the more decisively are traditional categories overthrown."[5] More metaphorically, indeed, Jakobson deals with the differences between prose and poetry as akin to the differences between languages, referring to those who write both poetry and prose as "cases of... bilingualism."[6] We can if we like also say with Paul Friedrich that the issue "is not poetry versus nonpoetry but more poetry versus less poetry," for it is certainly true that in the broader senses of the words "poetic language permeates ordinary language, and also technical languages."[7] (To be sure, we are more likely to assume this latter perspective if our primary concern is, as the title of Friedrich's book makes clear, poetry rather than prose.)

Nor are the structural differences between prose and poetry dependent on the level of achievement in either form. For the most part, good and bad poetry are poetry, and good and bad prose are prose, as we can perhaps see most clearly if we look at Old rather than Modern English examples of each. The preface to King Alfred's translation of Gregory the Great's sixth-century *Cura Pastoralis* ("Pastoral Care") begins (with both "eth" and "thorn" represented by modern English "th"):

4. Walter Nash, *Our Experience of Language* (New York: St. Martin's, 1971), 92-93.

5. Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature,* ed. Krystyna P. Pomorska and Stephen R. Rudy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 310.

6. Ibid., 301.

7. Paul Friedrich, *The Language Parallax: Linguistic Relativism and Poetic Indeterminancy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 24.