

# *Translation of Poetry and Poetic Prose*

*Proceedings of Nobel Symposium 110*

Editor  
**Sture Allén**

**World Scientific**

# Translation of Poetry and Poetic Prose

*Proceedings of Nobel Symposium*

江苏工业学院图书馆  
藏书章

Editor

**Sture Allén**

*Swedish Academy, Stockholm*



**World Scientific**

Singapore • New Jersey • London • Hong Kong

*Published by*

World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd.

P O Box 128, Farrer Road, Singapore 912805

*USA office:* Suite 1B, 1060 Main Street, River Edge, NJ 07661

*UK office:* 57 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9HE

**TRANSLATION OF POETRY AND POETIC PROSE**  
**Proceedings of Nobel Symposium 110**

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ISBN 981-02-3922-X

Printed in Singapore by Uto-Print

## PREFACE

Translation is a very important thing in our multilingual world. Eminent translation is a *sine qua non* in the work of the Swedish Academy, responsible for the Nobel Prize in Literature. This book offers the proceedings of the *Nobel Symposium on Translation of Poetry and Poetic Prose*, held at the IBM Nordic Education Center just outside Stockholm on August 24–28, 1998.

Nobel Symposia are arranged in accordance with the intentions of Alfred Nobel, the founder of the Nobel Prizes, and sponsored by the Nobel Foundation through its Nobel Symposium Fund. This Symposium was realized under the auspices of the Swedish Academy, founded in 1786 by King Gustav III in order to promote the Swedish language and Swedish literature. Some hundred years ago our Academy, which has eighteen members, accepted the wider task of selecting the recipients of the Nobel Prize.

This is the fourth Nobel Symposium supported by the Swedish Academy that has been carried out at the Education Center. The three previous meetings were the Nobel Symposium on Text Processing in 1980 (Proceedings available from Almqvist & Wiksell International, Stockholm), the Nobel Symposium on Possible Worlds in Humanities, Arts and Sciences in 1986 (Proceedings available from Walter de Gruyter, Berlin), and the Nobel Symposium on the Relation between Language and Mind (Proceedings available under the heading *Of Thoughts and Words* from World Scientific Publishing, Singapore).

Thanks are due to the Nobel Foundation and its Nobel Symposium Committee as well as to several others: Elisabeth Ahlberg and Monica Holmgren (secretariat), the staff of the Education Center, Bo Svensén (sub-editing and manuscript co-ordination), Tim Crosfield (English language check), and last but not least the participants for their wholehearted dedication.

February 1999

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## **OPENING ADDRESS**

Ladies and gentlemen,

All of us can confirm, I am sure, that there are marvellous translations of specimens of poetry and poetic prose. Still, there is clearly room for another attack on the basics. It is my privilege and pleasure to welcome you to this enterprise on behalf of the Swedish Academy, the responsible institution, and with thanks to the Nobel Foundation, our sponsor in Nobel matters, as well as its Nobel Symposium Committee. I would also like to express our gratitude to Efim Etkind, Seamus Heaney, and Daniel Weissbort of the International Committee, and to Kjell Espmark, Gunnar Harding, and Bengt Jangfeldt of the Local Committee.

Nobel Symposia are arranged in the fields indicated by the Nobel Prizes. This symposium is one of a number of meetings organized by the Swedish Academy. Our Academy has eighteen members and was founded in 1786 by King Gustav III in order to promote the Swedish language and Swedish literature. The royal founder gave the Academy a motto, Swedish "Snille och smak", the translation of which is in itself an interesting question. For various reasons I prefer "Talent and Taste". The Academy performs her duties, among other things, by publishing a historical dictionary, a normative glossary, a grammar, a series of Swedish classics, a sequence of memorial monographs, a journal called *Artes* (in co-operation with the Academies of Arts and Music and the Society of Nine), by developing and supplying lexical databases, by lending support

to a wide range of cultural undertakings, and by awarding about fifty prizes and scholarships annually. Some hundred years ago the Academy accepted the wider task of awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature, entrusted to the Academy by Alfred Nobel in his will. A prerequisite for it all is the total autonomy of the Academy: no organizational links to any governmental or other institution, financial independence, and internal election of members.

If you maintain, as I do, that the hallmark of a poem is its quality of being a multi-faceted, polyphonous entity, then you will have to acknowledge that it cannot be rendered in minute detail in another language. How could an open-ended, undefinable, elusive piece be translated in the strict sense of the word? Thus, even as a matter of principle, translation has its problems.

There are other well-known obstacles. Among them are structural differences in terms of lexicon, phonology, graphonomy, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, text dynamics, style, aesthetic tradition, etc., as well as divergences with respect to nature and culture in both a present-day and a historical perspective. A simple example: what about the everyday and biblical concept of 'shepherd' in a community where there are no sheep to herd?

Just one more example in order to illustrate three extremely interesting phenomena: ambiguity, lexical gaps, and situation. In the wartime of the forties, the Swedish authorities launched a slogan to warn against spies: "En svensk tiger". This means 'A Swede keeps silent' and/or 'A Swedish tiger'. The point is that *svensk* is a noun and an adjective, *tiger* a noun and a verb. This ambiguity cannot be transferred into English. And notice that there is no word in English corresponding to the Swedish verb meaning 'to keep silent'. We have the same expression but this phrase has not got the relentless energy that the single verb conveys. Such lexical gaps are quite often met with in English as well as in other languages. Furthermore, the watchword quoted evokes the very special feelings of war-preparedness typical of the situation in Sweden in the early forties.

Naturally, translation is of great interest to everybody in the field of language and literature. As a matter-of-course translation is of particular interest to the Swedish Academy in performing her task of selecting Nobel Laureates. In his will of 1895 Alfred Nobel made it clear that the

prize was to be global, "that the most worthy shall receive the prize, whether he be a Scandinavian or not", as he put it. I think you agree that this was a decision as audacious as it was far-sighted.

There are at least five thousand languages on earth. How do the statutes of the Nobel Foundation want us to cope with these? In fact, we are freed from taking them all into consideration. The wording in § 8 is as follows: "Where a nomination is couched in a language whose translation must entail particular trouble or considerable expense, or where, for the appraisalment of a proposed work, the prize-awarding body must chiefly make itself acquainted with the contents of writings couched in such a language, the prize-awarding body shall not be under obligation to take up the nomination for further consideration." However, our line of action is to pay attention to the will in the first place. This means that we commission translations when necessary. We also make it a rule to read translations into more than one language if possible.

A pointed observation headlined in a Swedish paper comes to mind in this connection. "Who should have the Nobel Prize? The translator or the poet?" Against the background of what I just said, these questions do not suggest a real problem for the Academy, but they pinpoint what is at stake here and enhance the importance of the translator. It is an experience common to most of us that a piece of writing is a baby whose fate is an open question in environments unfamiliar to us with regard to language.

This brings me to another observation made sometimes: bad translations are more dangerous than no translations. As a consequence, it is necessary to support the training of translators, to give them a chance to cultivate their talents, and to recognize their significance. After all, their contribution to the national literature of our countries is remarkable.

One of the most informative experiences I have had in contrastive style is my translation into my own native tongue, Swedish, of essays I originally wrote in English. Although English and Swedish are dialects of the same language, substantial adaptations were required. I could, of course, benefit from my close relation to the originator, never landing in the predicament of a colleague who received the following answer from a writer: "What I meant I have forgotten."



Our key-word *translation* takes all sorts of attributive modifiers. I have studied the instances of adjectives modifying the corresponding Swedish noun (*översättning*) in the corpora of the Language Bank of Göteborg University. I think they reflect the general picture reasonably well. It is evident that commentators have a large register.

There are obvious linguistic cases: Danish, English, Swedish, Turkish, dialectal, multi-lingual, etc. Time and speed are also referred to: new, modern, latest, old, mediaeval, quick, computerized, etc.

Most examples, however, characterize the quality of the translations; on the one hand: good (Swedish *god*, *bra*), fine (*fin*), beautiful (*vacker*), fresh (*frisk*, *fräsch*), buoyant (*spänstig*), enjoyable (*njutbar*), delightful (*charmant*), meritorious (*förtjänstfull*), vigorous (*kärnfull*), ingenious (*fyndig*), original (*originell*), classical (*klassisk*), successful (*lyckad*), excellent (*utmärkt*, *förträfflig*, *suverän*), eminent (*eminent*, *förnämlig*), brilliant (*lysande*), as clear as a bell (*klockren*), matchless (*makalös*), of genius (*genial*), in perfect harmony with the spirit of the original (*kongenial*); on the other hand: bad (*dålig*), defective (*bristfällig*), unimaginative (*fantasilös*), complaisant in a silly way (*fånigt vänlig*), stupid (*dum*), careless (*slarvig*), debatable (*diskutabel*), so-called (*så kallad*) — the ultimate failure.

Many cases bear upon the relation between the original and the translation; firstly: faithful (*trogen*), exact (*exakt*, *precis*), reliable (*pålitlig*), literal (*ordagrann*), accurate (*noggrann*), correct (*korrekt*, *rätt*, *riktig*), scrupulous (*skrupulös*), faultless (*klanderfri*), real (*verklig*), true (*sann*), straight (*direkt*), mere *-(ren)*, sturdy (*handfast*), ambitious (*ambitiös*), serious (*seriös*), conceivable (*tänkbar*), reasonable (*vettig*); secondly: free (*fri*), unconstrained (*obesvärad*), metaphysical (*metafysisk*); thirdly: adapted (*anpassad*), revised (*reviderad*), censored (*censurerad*), abridged (*förkortad*), complete (*komplett*, *fullständig*).

Some judgments of translations make reference to demand, designating them as wished-for (*eftertraktad*), popular (*populär*), difficult to find (*svåråtkomlig*), or private (*privat*). On the other hand, a reviewer argues that a certain translation is unnecessary (*onödig*), and a critic asks: "Why are such books translated?"

On the whole, I think it is fair to say that these attributive expressions, although representing a wide variety of aspects, are used in fairly vague senses. In particular, this seems to apply to a pertinent adjective I have

not mentioned so far, *linguistic*. To a certain extent the exceptional vagueness of so-called linguistic translation may be related to another lexical gap in English, a word for the concept of 'science of language', a hyperonym of *linguistics* and *philology* corresponding to German *Sprachwissenschaft* and Swedish *språkvetenskap*. In English, both *linguistics* and *philology* are used as the *genus proximum* of both. My point is that the two components of the science of language — the study of the structure and function of natural languages and the interpretation and investigation of earlier texts, respectively — have a very wide scope indeed and are indispensable allies in the field of translation.

Our programme focuses on aspects of theory, normalization, metre and rhyme, bilingual writing, unrelated languages, the role of the author, and competing translations. You will notice that no session is devoted to machine translation. I think it is beyond doubt that this facility is inapplicable in our case. On the basis, among other things, of my evaluation of the huge Eurotra project of the European Union, I can affirm that many interesting ends can be achieved in machine translation — but not this.

In sum, there are all sorts of viewpoints and attitudes. The very existence of originals has been questioned, and one Nobel Laureate is even reported to prefer a certain translation of one of his novels to his own text. In other words, our symposium has embarked on a vessel rich in experiences, ideas, and subjects for discussion. Our necessities take the form of preprint contributions, food for a week of transmogrification.

You're welcome!

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## **Session 1**

# **FUNDAMENTAL THEORETICAL ISSUES**



*Shimon Markish*



## **NO THEORY, PLEASE!**

In his book published as long ago as 1963, Professor Efim Etkind enumerates what he calls “theoretical problems” of poetic, or maybe better to say, literary translation:

- does the translator participate in his national literary creativity, or does he not?
- what is the strong creative individuality of the translator: is it a blessing, or rather a curse?
- how do philology and poetry, science and art merge in the work of the translator? Is this merge possible?
- is the metre of an original to be kept at any cost, under any circumstances?
- etc.

No doubt, these are real problems, and we professionals have had to meet them and deal with them. But I do not agree that they are theoretical. To my mind there is only one really and authentically general, i.e. theoretical, problem as far as literary translation is concerned, namely: is this translation possible or is it not possible?

Osip Mandelshtam, one of the great poets of the twentieth century, formulated very sharply:

Не ищущай чужих иаречей, но постарайся их забыть:  
Ведь всё равно не сумеешь стекло зубами укусить.

(1933)



(Do not tempt foreign languages, but try to forget them/  
No matter what your efforts are, you are incapable of biting a  
window-pane.)

And still he himself translated, from different national poetries, and not only because he was in desperate need of money, but taking pleasure in his work, at least sometimes. This main problem seems insoluble. Reason says: we lose so much in the process of translating that, as they say in French, *Le jeu n'en vaut pas la chandelle*. Take just one example, the most famous two lines by Catullus:

Odi et amo. Quare id faciam fortasse requiris.  
Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior...

(I hope we have not forgotten our Latin completely, — so let us remember corresponding translations into our corresponding mother-tongues, and let us compare....)

But on the other hand, every national literature is full of translations and they are a highly important, absolutely indispensable part of any national culture. I am sure you recognize the situation: one man of wisdom declares: "Movement is logically impossible, hence it does not exist", and the other, silently, stands up and begins to walk in front of the first.

I have to confess that all my life long as a translator I have been rather sceptical of theories, especially new and fashionable ones. Neither could I dare present myself as an expert and connoisseur of such theories. Still there are two or three very good books I recommend warmly to anybody interested in and concerned with the art of literary translation.

The first is the work by Efim Etkind mentioned above, published in Leningrad in 1963 (35 years ago!) and entitled "Поэзия и перевод" ("Poetry and Translation"). His general ideas in the book were developed during his Paris emigration almost 20 years later: "Un art en crise — Essai de poétique de la traduction poétique".

Equally important for me personally and much better known to scholars all the world over was "After Babel — Aspects of Language and Translation" by George Steiner, first published in 1975.