

*INTERPRETATIO*

LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION  
FROM CICERO TO TYTLER

Frederick M. Renner

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Amsterdam - Atlanta, GA, 1989

For Monika and Katia

CIP-GEGEVENS KONINKLIJKE BIBLIOTHEEK, DEN HAAG

Rener, Frederick M.

Interpretatio : language and translation from Cicero to Tytler /  
Frederick M. Rener. — Amsterdam:

Rodopi. — (Approaches to translation studies, ISSN  
0169-0523 ; vol. 8)

ISBN 90-6203-779-8

SISO 807.2 UDC 82.03

Trefw.: vertalen.

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Printed in The Netherlands

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## Introduction

The purpose of this book is to explore a new path leading towards a clearer understanding of the theory and practice of translation in Western Europe during the period running from classical antiquity to the end of the 18th century. This is a field in which scholars writing in all major European languages have toiled for over a century so extensively that their critical studies in the form of books and articles would fill the shelves of a small library.

Two reasons in particular seem to account for this scholarly interest. First, scholars have been attracted to this field for reasons of history. Translations mostly from Latin represent the very first written documents of many European national literatures. It is no secret that Latin literature itself is said to begin with translations from Greek by Livius Andronicus. It is in this sense that Kelly in his study on translation, *The True Translator* (1974), opened with the sweeping statement: "Western Europe owes its civilization to translators." (2)

The second and more important reason, however, is one of theory. The methods used by translators during the centuries between classical antiquity and the end of the 18th century, between Cicero and Tytler, seem to differ in many important respects from what scholars perceive translation to be, and the differences are to be found both in the theoretical principles and in the way they were applied. It is certainly not surprising that such a peculiar state of affairs would attract the attention of a remarkable number of scholars of such caliber. The main goal of these efforts has been the search for the theoretical principles which could make the methods at least comprehensible if not fully acceptable.

Despite this concerted effort, the search for the theory of translation has not produced satisfactory results. Jacobsen's sober assessment, in his study *Translation, a Traditional Craft* (1950), originally limited to works dealing with translation in Renaissance England, can be extended to the field as a whole:

There has been no lack of attempts to discover the theory behind translations on the literary level, and prefaces have been diligently collected and studied. But most modern studies dealing with that specific aspect are slender in compass, and their slender harvest yields little in the threshing and winnowing. We find the same commonplaces based on Jerome and Cicero in the question *verbum-verbo* as against *sensum-sensu*, the same *loci* on the translator's little skill and ruder tongue. (137)

The present study is still another "attempt to discover the theory behind translations," but it is one undertaken in the hope and with a modest degree of certainty that this time around the harvest will be more plentiful. This hope and modest certainty are based on several innovations which are being brought to the field through the present investigation. Before laying on the table the plans according to which the investigation is to be conducted, it seems advisable to cast a glance at the methods employed by previous researchers. This survey will serve two purposes: it will acquaint the reader with the principal issues debated in this field. It will at the same time make a diagnostic attempt with the aim of detecting the causes which may have led to the "slender harvest" lamented by Jacobsen.

The search for the theory of translation has traditionally been conducted along two avenues. Some scholars have relied primarily on what translators themselves have said, while others have concentrated on their practical performance. One must realize that these two approaches are imposed upon the scholar by the nature of the sources of evidence with which he has to work. The primary sources are of two kinds: one consists of statements found in treatises and prefaces to translations, the other of the translations themselves.

By and large, the majority of the existing studies uses the first avenue. Their aim is to distill the 'theory' by collecting, dissecting, and interpreting all the available statements and prefaces of a particular translator, or of the translators in a particular century as the case may be. The remaining group of scholars employs a comparative approach in which a translation is compared with the original noting the treatment of nouns, adjectives, and verbs, analyzing the sentence structure, and examining stylistic features. From this analysis, they hope to extrapolate the theoretical principles which the translator is supposed to have used.

The fact that neither approach has met with success can be ascribed to several causes. Some causes lie in the primary sources themselves, and others in the methods employed in dealing with them. When it comes to the primary sources, one must admit that there is no shortage of them. The problem with most of the sources is rather that they contain too much material of the same kind and, one is tempted to add, of the 'wrong' kind. Jacobsen's reference to "the same commonplaces" well depicts the situation, while at the same time hinting at the possible danger inherent in this sameness. What is wrong with these sources is not their content but the soporific effect they have not only on the general reader but also on the scholar. Their repetitious nature generates a feeling of *déjà vu* and thus lulls the reader into disregarding the importance of what the sources actually say.



The second and equally serious shortcoming is the fragmentariness of the information which translators have transmitted to us in their statements and prefaces. Other disciplines such as rhetoric, grammar, or poetics have the advantage that a great deal of information has been collected and preserved in the form of manuals. Translation, on the other hand, has not been so fortunate, even though so many people were active in it. In the absence of a manual on translation, the scholar is lost, for he lacks a point of reference and direction. He needs a framework into which to fit the available fragments of information found in the sources.

The third and by far the most important problem is one of semantics. The frequent instances in which scholars have given a different interpretation to one and the same statement is only one manifestation of the changes words have undergone in the course of time. Given the changes in the meaning of words, statements are often made to convey a message different from the one they once did. Furthermore, a good number of these words belongs among the technical terms whose meaning is essential to the comprehension of the statement. The scholar unaware of the change reads these statements through the glasses colored by his own mentality thus distorting what the author had in mind. The truth of this assertion will find confirmation later in a discussion of a few concrete cases.

If the sources bear some responsibility for the lack of progress in this research, the methods employed in the use of the sources are even more to blame. The first item to be considered is one that has to do not with the method but with the absence of it. This absence is most deplorable because it affects the very basis of any study, namely a consensus on the concept of theory.

It is surprising that the word 'theory' is on everybody's lips, yet little effort has been put into defining its meaning in the context of this research. Jacobsen is perhaps the only exception, for he considers theory as meaning a body of norms organized into a system. What disturbs most is the tendency of several scholars to use the word 'theory' in the plural. One is thus led to believe that translators followed not a generally accepted code but rather their own opinions or 'theories.'

The disarray in this fundamental matter is even greater when one sees that while some scholars search for the theory, others maintain that no theory of translation was in existence during the major portion of the period under investigation. The first signs of this trend of thought appeared in the early part of this century when Flora Amos advanced the thesis of the broken line or discontinuous tradition. In the preface to her study *Early Theories of Translation* (1920) she wrote:

The history of the theory of translation is by no means a record of easily distinguishable, orderly progression. It shows an odd lack of continuity. Those who give rules for translation ignore, in the great majority of cases, the contribution of their predecessors and contemporaries. (X)

This view has recently been taken over in Germany by Störig who comments in the introduction to his collection of primary sources entitled *Das Problem des Übersetzens* (1963):

"Hier soll ein Satz vorausstehen, den ich in einer amerikanischen Dissertation gefunden habe . . . [the text of the above quotation]. In der Tat: die Entwicklung ist diskontinuierlich, viele Stimmen verhallen ungehört selbst im eigenen Sprachbereich, erst recht dringen sie nicht in andere Länder. (XVIII)<sup>1</sup>

In a subsequent passage, Amos passed an even sterner judgment: "Moreover, there has *never* been uniformity of opinion with regard to the aims and methods of translation." (XI; *emphasis added*) It is unclear who first proposed the idea that no consensus existed among translators on how to translate. The fact is that it has recently gained popularity among scholars. Eric Jacobsen, for instance, subscribes to it, as it applies to Renaissance England: "The fact is, I suspect, that the Renaissance at least in England, had no theory of 'literary' translation." (138) Nida in his *Toward a Science of Translation* (1964) maintains that the Romans themselves and European nations who followed in their steps lacked such theory: "However, there was no systematic study of principles and procedures from the ancient world. They simply translated." (12) According to Thomas Steiner a similar situation reigned in England and France: "In the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance there was no theory of translation, literary or any other kind; translation itself could not be defined with certainty. . . . Even in France. . . no theory in any true sense was developed." (12)

It is surprising that the reader is never told when such a theory did finally emerge. Nida regards Dolet's five rules (middle 16th century) to be "the first formulation of a theory of translation" while Steiner seems to

1. A more extended version of this school of thought is given by Wills who underscores the existence of the broken line ("nicht geradlinige") of the tradition and that of the antagonistic positions ("Gegeneinander") of the various factions: "Nimmt man die einschlägigen Dokumente der vergangenen 2000 Jahre zur Hand, um sie auf die ihnen jeweils eigentümliche Argumentationsrichtung zu überprüfen, wird deutlich, daß sich diese Diskussion nicht als geradlinige, logisch folgerichtige, von Teilergebnis zu Teilergebnis voranschreitende Entwicklung durch die Jahrhunderte zieht, sondern daß ihr Verlauf durch das Nebeneinander und Gegeneinander verschiedener Übersetzungstheoretischer Standpunkte und Übersetzungsmethodischer Prinzipien charakterisiert wird." (27)

assign Dryden (end of the 17th century) the role of the first law-giver in matters of translation. Neither of these theoreticians actually provided a systematic presentation of a theory of translation. In this respect Störig seems to be right when he denies the existence of a systematic theory accepted by everybody: "Eine methodisch aufgebaute, von allen anerkannte Theorie der Übersetzung gibt es bis heute nicht." (XIX) Kelly in his study of a more recent date does have a chapter devoted to the theory of translation but symptomatically enough the title is followed by a question mark.

Beside the strange disagreement on this fundamental issue, scholarly works in this field have other flaws which prevented their efforts from reaching the desired goal. Chief among them is the narrow focus of investigation. For the most part, these studies have concentrated their search on an individual language, a particular century, or a specific translator. As a result, one is led to believe that there exists a French, an English, a German, a Spanish theory of translation. Each one is further subdivided by centuries or intellectual movements such as the Middle Ages, Humanism, Renaissance, Enlightenment and others. Consequently, the study of the theory of translation does not appear as a field of research but as an archipelago with many islands and no bridges.

The more one ponders this narrow approach, the more questionable it becomes. It is difficult to imagine that a French translator would follow a different method than his English or German counterpart. After all, they all rendered a noun with a noun and a verb with a verb. The fact that a French translator used a French noun cannot constitute a substantial difference in the theory or in the practice of translation. The same is true of translators working in different centuries of the same target language such as Luther (16th century) and Opitz (17th century), for instance. If there seems to be a difference, this lies in the type of the text —Luther working with Biblical, Opitz with fictional texts— and not in the basic approach. In fact, when Luther turns to translating secular material such as Aesop's fables, for instance, he "seems to paraphrase rather than translate." (Schwarz 1945, 294)

It is also doubtful that translators "just translated" without regard to any set of accepted norms. Gaspard de Tende writing in 1660 is of a different opinion when he writes: "Car il y a sans doute dans cet Art, aussi bien que dans tous les autres, de Regles certaines and assurées." (sigl. e iii<sup>v</sup>) It seems that the translators' prefaces and letters, their comments and particularly the "commonplaces" presuppose a common set of norms with which their readers were so familiar that a 'common-place' expression was sufficient to catch their attention. As a matter of fact, often the statements and prefaces appear to have been written as a

defense for having broken or bent the law. Such transgressions were severely censured by the critics —the proverbial and much maligned Zoili— who evidently regarded themselves as the guardians of traditional norms of behavior which translators had failed to comply with.<sup>2</sup>

These and similar reservations and considerations provided the question marks which, as we know, always get the investigation rolling. The same considerations were also responsible for my determination to set out on a path moving in a new direction both in terms of sources as well as in terms of method of investigation. Anybody familiar with this research will not fail to notice that several heretofore unknown or marginally known materials are being used here. Among them one should mention the treatises by Manetti in the 15th century, by Vives, Humphrey, Fausto Sebastiano in the 16th century, those by Schottus and Huet in the 17th century, and finally those by Venzky and Tytler in the 18th century. In addition, the major portion of the material collected by previous scholarly research in all major languages of Western Europe has been consulted. If some languages such as Italian and Spanish are less represented, the cause lies in the fact that scholars in these languages have not been as active as their French, English, and German colleagues. Portuguese and the Slavic languages have even less to offer as far as available information on primary sources is concerned.

The point in which this study parts company with all its predecessors regards the method to be used in accessing the sources. It is to this area that the present study is confident to have made its most important contribution. There is no doubt that even the most pregnant and significant sources are of little help if one lacks the appropriate tools of investigation. Several innovations had to be introduced in order to reach this goal.

The first innovation is to regard the sameness of the sources, the so-called 'commonplaces,' as something really common, i.e. shared by all translators regardless of their nationality or period in which they were active. In order to find out how common these ideas were, the traditional

2. Zoilos, a sophist in the 4th century (B.C.) famous for his criticism of Homer, personifies the prototype of the malignant critic. In prefaces to early translations into English he received a variety of epithets such as "curious," "spiteful," "envious," "carping," "scornful," "rancorous," "poisoned." (Conley 87 n.16) Similar expressions are found also in other languages. Opitz speaks of "böse mäuler" (54), and Spanish sources refer to "maldizientes," "murmuradores" (Pastor 35). Bruni defines such critics as people who "de iis iudicant, de quibus nec sensum nec iudicium habent." (127) Dryden observes that, with time, the name of these individuals has changed but not the function. He points out that men "who were then called Zoili . . . now take upon themselves the venerable name of censors." (2: 3)

narrow vision must be replaced by a panoramic view of the whole field without the barriers based on language or periodizations. The attempt will be made to show that the many centuries between classical antiquity and the eighteenth century should be regarded as a unit which is cemented by a strong tradition. The binding element is a common theory of language and communication and an equally jointly shared idea of translation.

Perfected by classical Greece and Rome, this theory of language formed part of the educational system in all European countries during the period under investigation. In this as well as in many other respects, Europe was schooled by Greece and Rome. While the nations of Europe spoke different languages, they thought along the same lines and used the same terminology which was borrowed and translated from Latin. Translators in particular were involved in language and languages by their very profession and hence felt the influence and the consequences of this theory more directly than other literary professions. It is therefore not unreasonable to view all translators though distant from each other in terms of chronology, geography, or language as belonging to this tradition and hence working with the same general principles.

This common background is visible not only in the theory of language but also in the translators' notion of translation which was also inherited from Greece and Rome. As we shall see later, the realm of translation extended over two different territories. On the one hand, it was regarded as a literary activity. As such it was subject to the rules of language. However, in its essence translation was not a linguistic but rather an interpretative operation. The Greek word *hermeneia* and its Latin equivalent *interpretatio* which was in classical times the technical term for translation are indicative of this conception. Since this word has been selected as the title of this study, the hermeneutic connection is ever present in the course of the discussion.

The second innovation is the plan to use a panoramic approach not only in the historical sense but particularly in terms of the subject matter. The intention is to present the process of translation in its entirety. While translating may appear to be a single act, it was regarded as a long series of steps arranged in a logical sequence. In their statements, translators may refer to one or more of these steps. While the most important steps are mentioned in most of the sources, some others may be included in only one quotation in a particular language. Fragments of the system are scattered over the entire Continent both in terms of time and of place. By assembling the tesserae of this mosaic, a whole manual on translation has been compiled which, though never written, nevertheless existed and was known to all translators and particularly to their critics.

The reconstruction of this system and of the individual phases of the process made it possible to break the code which makes reading the primary sources so difficult and perilous. Expressions such as 'purity,' 'perspicuity,' 'propriety of words,' 'proprieties of language,' to mention just a few, turned out to be technical terms with a specific meaning, and the original meaning is tied to their position in this system of notions. Such terminology has at the present time lost the precision it once had, if it has not completely disappeared from the linguistic vocabulary. With this technical dictionary it is now possible to read the sources more profitably and understand the meaning given to them by their authors.

It is not difficult to see that in this context the word 'theory' acquires a more definite meaning. The term appears here in the singular form and is used to refer to a body of principles and procedures which were arranged in a system so as to cover all the steps of the process of translating. The purpose of the present study is not only to present this whole system but to use it as the blueprint for the disposition of the material, so that in reading the book the reader will in effect witness the unfolding of the process of translating from the beginning to the end.

One of the constant preoccupations throughout this investigation has been to give as sharp a picture as possible of the frame of mind of the past. This is visible not only in the basic premises outlined above and in the system used in arranging the material but particularly in the general attitude towards the past. Whereas many scholars view translation during this period with a critical eye — Kelly's intention "to criticize, rather than evaluate" (5) is symptomatic— the present study looks at this subject with the eyes of an archeologist. The intention here is to explain, not to criticize. The findings are described as found and an attempt is made to account for their being as they are and not as we may expect or wish them to be.

Here is a brief outline of the itinerary. According to the classical theory, language had two levels, one of grammar and one of rhetoric. This two-storied arrangement is an important factor also in translation. Hence the study, having first explained the basic tenets of the theory of language, devotes the first major portion to the grammatical phase and the second to the rhetorical phase of translating. Each of these two major blocks is in turn divided into two sections: one is propaedeutic in nature and consists of a survey of the principal concepts of grammar and rhetoric as they were held at that time. The second shows the manner in which these concepts were applied in the work of the translator.

The third and last part of the book deals with the abstract facets of translation such as the definitions and typologies of translation. It

concludes, as manuals often did in the past, with a treatment of the translator as the *artifex*, discussing his abilities, his qualifications, and his duties.

A few other characteristics of this study should not be overlooked. In order to reflect the mentality of the time and preserve the precision of thought, the terminology used here is the original Latin as opposed to the trend of other studies which use terminology coined by the scholars themselves or taken from the vocabulary of modern linguistics. By keeping to the original terminology, the reader is introduced to the ideas of classical linguistics which have molded the work of the translators. He is thus compelled to think in and listen to only one set of terms rather than having to shift back and forth from antiquity to modernity.

As opposed to some other studies in this field, the present study has as a rule avoided a language loaded with exotic expressions and heavy rhetorical ornamentation. The intention was to make the book accessible to any interested reader rather than to the specialist only. The second not less important reason could be called 'archeological' because it stems from the intention of conforming, even in this respect, to the norms of the past. George Campbell best expressed this norm in the preface to his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) when he wrote:

... as the nature of this work is didactical, wherein the understanding only is addressed, the style in general admits no higher qualities than purity and perspicuity. . . . The best ornaments out of place are not only unbecoming but offensive." (xliv)

The research for this study was conducted intermittently over a long period of time. Some seminal ideas were made public some time ago in the article: "Zur Übersetzungskunst im 17. Jahrhundert." Since then, much more material from primary and secondary sources has accumulated and with it came the realization that the topic was much vaster and more complex than initially suspected. Considerations of time and money prevented the writing of the voluminous study which the topic deserves and the reader rightly expects.

Instead, the mass of the collected material has been carefully trimmed to fit into the confines of a book of more modest proportions but no lesser commitment to the integrity of presentation. What the reader can expect to find in the book, then, is a condensed account of the whole process of translating in its essential traits, presented in the form of a skeleton manual logically organized according to the principles in vogue during that time. Selected quotations taken from primary sources in all major European languages are used as evidence to substantiate the points at issue and also to show the international dimensions of the system.



Owing to its expository (and exploratory) nature, the present study made no attempts to take issue with the plethora of divergent views offered by scholarly research in all major European languages. Exception was made only in a few of the more salient cases. Since no study is known which seemed to approach this particular subject from the 'linguistic' point of view, divergent opinions and conclusions are to be expected. However, taking time to examine them here would unnecessarily disrupt the flow of the exposition without bringing any real benefits to the reader.

There is hope that despite its limitations, voluntary or involuntary as they may be, this study has reached its primary objective. The intention was to give the study of the theory of translation in the period under investigation a new direction by placing it in the perspective of the theory of language. Using this track, it has been possible to identify the individual stages of the process, find their position and their function within the system, and learn the technical vocabulary. These findings can serve as a workable basis for future research not only in the field of translation but also in fields involving language and literary criticism, to mention just the most obvious.

Grateful acknowledgements are due to the friendly and capable staff of the *Landes- und Universitätsbibliothek* in Göttingen where most of the material has been collected during many summers. Appreciation is owed to my former colleague Harold P. Fry, now at Kent State University, Kent (Ohio), an attentive and benevolent reader, for his patient reading of several versions of this work. His suggestions helped in removing the most serious stylistic deficiencies in the text (some were beyond repair) and, what is more, in significantly improving the orderly disposition of the material. The greatest thanks, however, goes to the members of my family and my relatives for their support (moral and material), their forbearance and sacrifices during the many vicissitudes of this enterprise.

Finally, the acknowledgements would not be complete without thanking Professor Raymond van den Broeck, the editor, for accepting the study in this series and Mr. Fred van der Zee of Editions Rodopi for publishing it.

Greensboro, North Carolina (USA)

Marburg an der Lahn,  
Summer 1988.



## **Prologue**

### **THEORY OF LANGUAGE**