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TRANSLATION AS AN ALTERNATE MODE OF EXPRESSION

B. Hunter Smeaton, Edmonton.

*Chi poria mai pur con parole sciolte
dicer del sangue e delle piaghe appieno
ch' i' ora vidi, per narrar più volte ?¹*

Inferno, Canto xxviii

After many millenia upon earth, man's perceptions were refined to the point that he could say, in words, how he differs from animalkind: it is, above all, in his ability to symbolize. (One cannot leave a message with an animal). And yet this power is a very relative one; and, in his vanity, he has often overestimated it — or to put it more exactly, he has overestimated the effectiveness of language as a means of communication.

To understand — or begin to understand — the translator's (or the interpreter's) problem, one must first have a notion of the nature of speaking and writing as such, under the normal conditions where only *one* language is involved. In either case, one has to do with the dichotomy of expression and content. Or to state the matter in terms of dictionaries: what, actually, is a monolingual dictionary but a bilingual dictionary whose entries happen to be defined in the same language ?

(1) Translation by J. A. Carlyle, taken from J. M. Dent & Son's facing-page edition of *La Divina Commedia* (1933), originally prepared for the « Temple Classics » edition (the *Inferno* having appeared in 1899): « Who, even with words set free, could ever fully tell, by oft relating, the blood and the wounds that I now saw ? » The author of the present article, frustrated by this rendition, here attempts an improvement: « Who could ever fully, even with words set free / And with repeated tellings, tell / of the blood and wounds I now did see ? » Even this new try, of course, is not without its inevitable « betrayal ». On the positive side, the rhyme is preserved, and something of the metre. It is also more faithful to the original in that the double function of 'pur' ('even') is brought out (« pur con parole sciolte » and « pur... per narrar più volte ») by incorporating the governed elements into a single, continuous phrase. The dangling nature of « by oft relating » is thereby also relieved, and similarly, the incorrect translation of 'per' in this context. Also, the grammatical redundancy of 'del sangue' and 'delle piaghe' — required by the structure of the Romance languages — is done away with in the phrase « of the blood and wounds », and the result is certainly more English. On the negative side, the translation 'set free' for 'sciolte' is less than felicitous (something like 'unleashed' would be preferable — but if one seeks to preserve rhyme, who can find a rhyme for 'unleashed' ? As for 'released', for which rhymes could be found, it must be rejected as unpoetic and not without ambiguity.) By the same token, 'saw' would be preferable to 'did see', for aesthetic reasons alone — and even though Tennyson would have had no compunction about this if a rhyme or a syllable were at stake. But — que faire ? The translation of poetry is like monogamy. The readers of *J. des Trad.* are invited to do better with this passage (always remembering the deadline). ...In the meantime let not the purpose of this citation be forgotten: it is the thought « even with words unleashed » that is relevant to the present article, which is concerned with the limitations of human verbal expression.

Since ancient times, philosophers have reflected upon the relationship between "thought" and "language" (that is, between cognition and expression). Various Greek philosophers put forth the view that a thought is inevitably impoverished, or pruned, as it were, as soon as it is reduced to words. Plato, in his Seventh Epistle, digresses upon "the weakness of language" and observes that "no sensible man will venture to express his deepest thoughts in words, especially in a form which is unchangeable, as is true of written outlines."² His contemporary, Gorgias of Leontini, went so far as to argue that "words do not make manifest the outside world, but the outside world makes known words", and that sensory perceptions cannot be conveyed via words from one person to another.³ A similar recognition of the servile rôle of words is encountered in the writings of Indian Buddhist scholars in the 5th century A.D., who observed, in their disputations, that no word, even a concrete noun, can have true autonomy but is rather merely a part of a total utterance, which in turn depends for its total significance upon not only intralingual context but also situational and cultural factors.⁴ It was not until the 19th and 20th centuries that these hypotheses regarding the nature of meaning (here oversimplified) reappeared, in Europe, and came to form the basis of modern semantics.⁵

At this point it may be well to pause and address fellow translators personally on the matter of structural linguistic theory, since a good part of them, including many of the finest, are too busy translating to consider its relevance to them.

Of the two basic trends in linguistics it may be said that they are simply different views of the same truth. One school (the formalists) puts meaning on the shelf and proceeds to analyse what is left, namely, phonology and grammar. This permits a type of inventory-and-distribution analysis which verges on mathematics. (Naturally, they always keep one eye on the shelf, since human subjects are still their point of departure). For some reason, it is in English-speaking countries that the formalists hold sway.

(2) Translation by Glenn R. Morrow, *Plato's Epistles*, rev. ed. (1962), p. 239. Cf. also Professor Morrow's introductory discussion of Plato's theory of knowledge as expressed in this epistle, *loc. cit.*, pp. 68-71.

(3) See J. H. M. M. Loenen, *Paramenides, Melissus, Gorgias*, Assen (1959), p. 199 ff. Dr. Loenen, in his discussion of this citation from Gorgias, notes: «...One need only think of a blind man, to whom words will never be able to convey what colour is.»

(4) See K. Kunjunni Raja, «The Theory of Meaning according to Buddhist Logicians», in *The Adyar Library Bulletin*, Dec. 1954 = Vol. XVIII, part 3-4, pp. 178-95 (esp. p. 182 f.). The author quotes Prof. J. R. Firth as having observed, regarding the remarkable coincidence of de Saussure's theories with many of those advanced by early Buddhist scholars (in particular the notion of meaning as a negative value, i.e., a thing is what it is by virtue of all those things of the same category which it is not): «It is just possible that he [de Saussure] had learned something of Indian philosophy» (*Technique of Semantics*, Transactions of the Philological Society, 1935, p. 63). ...Regarding the autonomy of the word see Ch. 2 of S. Ullmann, *The Principles of Semantics* = Glasgow Univ. Publ. LXXXIV. On the rôle of situation and culture as meaning determinants see Part II of the present article.

(5) By «semantics» here is to be understood both structural and non-structural semantics.

The other major school, for its own set of also justifiable reasons, sees fit to include a *lexical* level of analysis as well and is thus — on this level, at any rate — directly involved with both forms and meaning at the same time. Their thinking usually derives in one degree or another from the Genevan scholar Ferdinand de Saussure, whose *Cours de Linguistique Générale* was first published in 1915,⁶ and characteristically exhibits "some dichotomy, some dualism, e.g., *signifiant* and *signifié*, form and substance, expression and content, form and content, etc."⁷ It goes without saying that, since it is this dichotomy with which the translator is practically and preëminently concerned, it is to the Saussureans that he must feel the closer affinity.

In addition to the concept of the *linguistic sign*, which is the sum of the signifier (word or locution uttered⁸) and the signified (the area of meaning covered by a given signifier), neither of which can exist without the other, a further major premise of Saussurean doctrine is the structural *uniqueness* of every language (or dialect of a language). On this general point all structural linguists are agreed, whether their views are traceable to de Saussure or not: no two languages have the same set of functionally distinctive sounds or the same set of grammatical elements, nor can the permissible arrangements of the phonological or grammatical elements ever be the same in two languages. De Saussure, however, and his direct or indirect followers, extend this factor to the lexical level as well: each language, through its signifiers, segments the potentially signifiable in its own specific way. To the translator this principle is graphically illustrated by the two-way bilingual dictionary, which, for a given entry in one language, is likely to show several definitions in the other. This does not mean that the second language has a more ample vocabulary than the first but simply that meaning is differently segmented in the two (a fact readily verifiable by examining the other half of the dictionary, where the entries are in the other language, and it is seen that the same one-to-many ratio obtains)⁹.

(6) It is actually a posthumous reconstruction of his lectures at the University of Geneva, based on the careful notes taken by his pupils Charles Bally and Albert Sèchéhayé, and by others. An English translation of the 3rd ed., by Wade Baskind, now exists (New York, Philos. Libr., 1959). The translator renders *signifiant* and *signifié* as «signifier» and «signified» respectively, though this involves the awkward but perhaps inescapable plural «signifieds» (awkward since English structure does not tolerate a sequence of two grammatical suffixes). Ullmann also uses *significans* and *significatum*.

(7) G. L. Bursill-Hall, «Levels Analysis: J. R. Firth's Theories of Linguistic Analysis»; *Journal of the Canadian Linguistic Association* (since Fall '61 = *The Canadian Journal of Linguistics*) VI, No. 2, p. 125.

(8) It is essential, of course, that the basic formulation be made in terms of speech, since written languages derive from the spoken and not vice versa. The written word is equally well a signifier, however — a stage removed.

(9) This and related matters were treated in some detail in a series of three articles by this author in *J. des Trad.* II.3, III.3 and IV.1. See further Landar, Herbert J., Ervin, Susan M., and Horowitz, Arnold E., «Navaho Color Categories», *Language* 36, No. 3 (July-Sept., 1960), who preface their article with this quotation from Ludwig Wittgenstein (*Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §381): «Wie erkenne ich, dass diese Farbe Rot ist? — Eine Antwort wäre: 'Ich habe Deutsch gelernt.'»

It is only proper to note that de Saussure's signifier/signified dichotomy has met with severe criticism from other semanticists, notably from Ogden and Richards, Gardiner and Gombocz,¹⁰ who find his scheme defective in having only two terms, "[whereas, in fact,] the name refers, not to the thing itself, but to our idea of the thing" (Gombocz). For "the thing itself" these critics would supply a third term, such as "referent" (e.g., Ogden and Richards).

To this it can be replied that all such arrangements are necessarily operating conveniences, and that one need but equate "signified" with "thought" or "idea" to restore harmony among the schemes. There is what one says (or writes), and there is what it reflects (perhaps a better term than "signifies").

This writer would quarrel only with the Saussurean dictum that the signifier and the signified necessarily presuppose one another.¹¹ It is certain that there are words, stems and affixes that either do not in themselves signify, or which signify very little. One need only consider the purely relational elements of a language, such as articles and a good part of conjunctions and prepositions ("empty words", to use the Chinese grammarians' term).¹² Affective elements are also an ingredient *added* to the imparting of information as such (take, for example, pure interjections, or the ramifications of such elements as 'after all', 'enfin', 'schon', 'uzé', etc. — often no more than a *point d'appui* for a particular intonational pattern which could be expressed *even if they were not there at all*).¹³ Finally, one may note the language of ritual, which forms an integral part of a given ceremony in combination with certain actions, garb, chants, etc., constituting a symbol or a patterned sequence of symbols. In such a case the language employed may very well be one unknown, or only vaguely known, to the majority of the participants in the ritual or ceremony (e.g., "ite missa est" in the Roman Catholic mass).¹⁴

Likewise, signifieds without established signifiers abound in daily life. Who has not had the experience of seeing a quite familiar flower or shrub, or perhaps some mechanical device, and being stumped for a name for it? (If one is *forced* to name it, as will happen when one wants to buy

... (10) See Ullmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-72.

(11) As summarized by J.-P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet, *Stylistique Comparée du Français et de l'Anglais*, (p. 28): « Selon la définition de F. de Saussure, le signe est l'union indissoluble d'un concept et de sa forme linguistique, écrite ou parlée. »

(12) This observation, too, has its forerunner in the debates of the Buddhist logicians. Kunjunni Raja, citing the critics of one of them (Apoha), notes (*op. cit.*, p. 190): « Even if the theory of Apoha could explain some of the words referring to substantives, this theory will fail to explain the meaning of words like 'and' or 'thus'. »

(13) Compare the following, identical in significance (and in intonational contour): 1) You do want to, don't you? 2) But you really do want to, don't you? 3) But you do want to do it, after all, don't you? ...Such elements are called *charnières* by Vinay and Darbelnet (*op. cit.*). The situation where there are no "charnières" present for the intonational contours to be focussed upon they refer to as « charnière zéro ». See also Walter Arndt, « Modal Particles' in Russian and German, » *Word* XVI, No. 3, pp. 323-36.

(14) In this connection see further Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and their Magic*, Vol. II, Part 6; « An Ethnographic Theory of the Magical Word. »

one, one may resort to a descriptive circumlocution — “that thing you put on such-and-such to keep it from doing so-and-so” — or the syntactic slot may be filled with an expression such as “that what-do-you-call-it — you know...” — thus putting the complete burden on the hapless tradesman.)¹⁵

From all the foregoing, the following general conclusions of constant relevance to the translator may be safely drawn :

Language is an external phenomenon with an inner counterpart for its every concrete manifestation. As a medium for the rendering of a concept or response (whether purely deliberative, primarily emotional or, as in most cases, somewhere between these poles), it is inherently imperfect, if only because the inner unit underlying the outer, overt one is formless, yet is required to assume a form — specifically, a linear form (de Saussure) — and therewith to adjust to the strictures of a particular linguistic patterning.¹⁶

It may occur, moreover, that the reduction to words of even the clearest impression one would like to convey is not merely difficult (in view of the limited adequacy of words, so that one cannot hope to hit the mark exactly), but that it is well nigh impossible.¹⁷ Sensitive writers, and artists in general, have always realized this. How often the German Romanticists exclaimed, in their desperate exuberance, that their reaction to a moment of beauty was utterly *unaussprechlich* [inexpressible] or *unsäglich* [beyond words] ! Then there is the English cliché : “Words failed me...” Bold experimentalists, with varying success, have sought to make the overt manifestation more closely express the inner “stream of consciousness” by taking the language in their own hands and deliberately warping it to that end.¹⁸

(15) A particular case of undesignated items (or operations) arises in connection with cultural innovations. During the lag between the time a member of the recipient culture first sees an item new in his experience until the moment he first refers to it in speech (and thereby gives it a *name*), its status has not been that of a signified but of a « signifiable ». See summary of the author's study of this process in *Dissertation Abstracts*, Vol. XX, No. 5 (1959), pp. 1776-77 (« Lexical Expansion due to Technical Change, as illustrated by the Arabic of Al Hasa, Saudi Arabia, during the decade 1938-48 »).

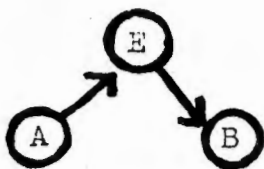
(16) To speak of an « inner counterpart » or an « inner unit » is not, of course, to dabble in mysticism; nor yet is it in any sense a commitment to behaviorism. For a treatment of these issues (albeit a tendentious one) see Adam Schaff, *Introduction to Semantics*, Pergamon Press, 1962, translated from the Polish by Olgierd Wojtasiewicz (pp. 130-39, « The controversy between the transcendentalist and the naturalist conception »).

(17) The primary reference here, of course, is to literary expression and literary translation. In technical writing a very high degree of exactness can be achieved, and in technical translation a very close equivalence, so that for all practical purposes the original and the translation *are* equivalent. However, the average translator's life is an unnatural one in that he is almost wholly preoccupied with subject matter which is marginal to life proper (that is to say, with technical and semi-technical materials) — and indeed, this marginal life may come to seem normal to him.

(18) The experimental theatre in particular would reduce the domain of the word as an effective conveyor of reality, as penetratingly analysed by Martin Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (= Doubleday Anchor A279; New York, 1961); on the « devaluation of language » see esp. pp. 294-300. Note, however, the dissenting reaction of a distinguished translator and contributor to *J. des Trad.*, Lewis Bertrand, in « Paperbacks Ahoy », distributed to members of the ATA in February 1963 (p. 4).

Meanwhile, Korzybski's followers, the general semanticists, rail in vain against our imprecisions. They are spending their energies, however eruditely, on the mere symptoms of a universal and timeless human process. Language is indeed an overlaid function, (and not merely in Sapir's Darwinian sense), and consistently perfect communication can never be more than an ideal — even with the help of redundancy as a corrective mechanism.

When, now, the competent translator *trans-lates* from language A to language B, he reduces a manipulable portion of the former to its formless essence (E)¹⁹ and reproduces it in the latter :



And since E can never more than approximate its manifestation in either A or B, whose respective structures are in any event unique, it follows that A could never equal B. At best it may effectively parallel it.²⁰

The translating situation here assumed has been that of translations

(19) « Formless essence » is simply a term of convenience, to be sure, and it is not implied here that the non-linear domain cannot be analysed. Approaches to such analysis range, on the applied level, from those which have their roots in psychometrics (e.g., the so-called psycholinguists, represented by Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum) to those which turn Saussurean principles to account (thus, Vinay and Darbelnet's *op. cit.*; cf. in particular their subdivision of « métalinguistique », p. 45, Table). In the spontaneous act of translation, however, no such breakdowns are made, of course, any more than one is aware of any distinction between lexical and grammatical elements in spontaneous speaking and writing (in writing one may *become* aware of it, after the event, e.g., in editing).

(20) A. V. Fëdorov (*Vvedeniye v Teoriyu Perevoda*, 2nd rev. ed., Moscow, 1958), via a quite different chain of reasoning, arrives at very much the same conclusion. After disposing of the mystique of « untranslatability » propounded by various earlier commentators, both Russian and foreign, he discusses (in Ch. 4) the principle of the « adequate » translation, citing (p. 130) the definition by A. A. Smirnov in the latter's article « Translation » in the *Literaturnaya Entsiklopediya* (Vol. 8, 1934, p. 527): « We must regard as *adequate* any translation which succeeds in transmitting the author's intentions (both those he has objectively thought through and those of an unconscious nature) — this in the sense that it achieves a specific artistic effect upon the reader in which both the idea and the emotion of the original are present and brings out, insofar as possible [through the use of exact equivalents or satisfying substitutes], all the store of imagery, color, rhythm and the like which the author himself employed. These latter factors, however, must be considered not as an end in themselves, but merely as a means for arriving at the total effect. That something is bound to be sacrificed in this process, of course, goes without saying. » This definition Fëdorov finds unsatisfactory, however, and takes Smirnov to task for what Bloomfieldians would probably call « mentalism ». In place of the term « adequacy » he proposes what he calls « polnotsennost' » (viz., maximum validity), which he defines as follows (p. 132): « By maximum validity in a translation is meant comprehensive transmission of the thought content of the original, together with a wholly valid correspondence in functional stylistic respects. » (For the translation of both these citations from Fëdorov the author of the present article is responsible.)

between the languages of similar cultures. This is by no means the only type of translation, however; and it often occurs that the translator is faced with the problem of allusions which have no equivalent in the culture of the target language. A sequel to this article will deal with the problem of time and space-bound allusions,²¹ and how or in what degree they can be coped with.



(21) In the terminology of Vinay and Darbelnet: « allusions figées dans la métalinguistique ».