

TRANSLATING, THE LINGUIST AND THE MEETING OF CULTURES

Translating is often discussed in scholarly circles. Writers talk about it as, obviously, professional translators also do. Even linguists have something to say about this activity, as old as the oldest civilizations. We should like to offer some ideas here on a subject that is so frequently considered. While the ideas are not entirely new, they are results drawn from a lengthy reflection and from the no less lengthy experience of translators. We hope they will indicate some directions that would be fruitful for a continuation of the discussion.

To begin with, we would quite simply like to look into the question itself of “translating”: apparently, this has not often been done, and we would like to do it the way any professional linguist should, that is, examine the form or forms in which this idea proceeds. An exact study can be very enlightening here, adding something new to the dossier of terms that in the well-studied languages explain the activity of translating. It so happens that

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Romanian has a number of such terms, and that an examination of their form and meaning is full of information on what it means to translate.

The term *a traduce*, to translate, from the Italian *tradurre*, itself issued from *traducere*, of Italian humanist origin, which had replaced *translare* created from *translatus*, participle of *transferre* (which in antiquity was the Latin correspondent of the Greek *metafero*) does not appear before the beginning of the 19th century. In the 16th century, Romanian used *a scoate*, literally “to go out,” as well as *a întearce*, “to return.”¹ In the 17th century, however, the Old Slavic word *a izvodi*, “to extract,” was used to express the idea of “translate,” as well as *a talmăci*, also Slavic, literally “to interpret.” In the 18th-19th centuries appeared *a preface*, literally “remake, transform,” as well as, in Transylvanian, *a români*, that is, “romanize” or “adapt to Romanian.” Through all this series of terms, we may read a history of the successive conceptions of the act of translating: from extraction or transformation on the basis of interpretation, we pass to the modern notion of translating, that is, putting into a different language what was in the original language, by resolving as well as possible the problems posed by this operation whose frequency tends to vulgarize by dissimulating, in the evidence of a practice as old as the world, the mixed apories and fruitfulness of what underlies it: the meeting of cultures.

TRANSLATION AS TEST: THE DIFFICULT PARTS OF LANGUAGE

Phonology, morphology (when it really exists, which obviously depends on the languages), syntax, synchronic as well as diachronic, these are the difficult parts of a language. Translating furnishes a very simple test for this property of a language to have parts as difficult as those are.

Let us begin with phonology. Of course, it is the text as product, not the language as a system making it possible, that is translated. Furthermore, up until now we have most often thought about

¹ See A. Niculescu, “La notion “traduire” dans la langue roumaine,” in *Festschrift für Johannes Hubschmid zum 65. Geburtstag* hrsg. von O. Winkelmann und M. Braisch, Bern, Francke, 1982, pp. 359-366, from which are taken these data on Romanian.

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translation by considering written texts, while every day there is an occasion to translate just as many oral exchanges (as interpreter or quite simply as an obliging intermediary who serves as translator—*turdjumân* in Arabic, that is, interpreter) between two or more people who cannot communicate because of the obstacle of language. Now, in written texts, and even more in oral statements, there is a universal phenomenon, to which linguistics has just recently begun to pay attention, and that the specialists in syntax have most often concealed while there is a direct syntactic incidence: intonation. Intonation, not sufficiently noted in written texts through punctuation marks for languages that have used them for a long time but clearly audible in any oral exchange, is something that has meaning and therefore can be translated. But the difficulties begin here. Some intonational patterns are universal, from one language to another the same meaning corresponds to a melodic contour that, from one language to another, is the same or nearly so. Such is the case for the melodic contour of hierarchized information, that for the succession of the *theme* (the least informative element) and the *rheme* (the most informative element) or *vice versa*. Such is the case also for the personal modalization of the statement, that is, for the forms that express the position of the speaker on what he himself says. It even seems that the intonational pattern in this case and in the preceding one are, universally, quite similar. In other words, a statement in spoken French, “*il n’est pas là, papa!*” (in which *il* and *papa* are coreferentials) compared with another statement, “*ce n’est pas ça, à mon avis*”: these two statements begin with the most informative part; both *papa* (being spoken of) and *à mon avis* (position of the speaker on what he has just said and which is the main message) are less informative than what they follow; they are thus the thematic parts of the statements whose rhematic parts are made up of *il n’est pas là* and *ce n’est pas ça*. Now, we see that in languages where this has been studied, there is always a difference in register between the rhematic part (articulated on a more acute tone) and the thematic part (“grave,” all being relative of course, and the “grave” being itself perhaps “acute”).

However, most intonational patterns having specific meanings vary from one language to another and must therefore be, literally, translated. The best language texts give indications of intonational

patterns, corresponding to various meanings, that the student must learn. It is thus a matter, in phonology itself (in prosodology, the part of phonology that deals with melodic phenomena), of a test on the nature of language seen through one of its elements, that of sounds. And this test is furnished to the linguist through reflecting on the activity of translation.

In morphology, the study of translating provides much more decisive tests on the difficult part of language. But first, what is morphology and why may we speak of morphosyntax? If we define morphology as the functionalist school of Paris, founded by A. Martinet, does, that is, as the field of study of the variants of the signifying, where variant implies automatic and conditioned contextual change, then it is clear that morphology is a component that many languages lack: monosyllabic languages of the Far East, for example, are known for the invariability of units, often of only one syllable, of which they are comprised, and we can scarcely see how we can speak of morphology in the present sense. But if by morphology we mean the inventory of the categories of units between which any language makes a distinction, it is obvious that morphology is a defining component of the idea of language and thus universal. It is then that translation furnishes a test. Because the categories present in one case are absent in another, and what we are obliged to say here is absolutely impossible to translate there.

A revealing example is that of noun classifiers. As we know, in many African languages—especially Bantu—it is not a matter of morphemes obligatorily associated with the noun. This is also true in Southeast Asia (Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, Burmese, etc.) or the verb (the Athabaska languages of North America, languages of New Guinea, etc.). In Chinese, for example, it is impossible to say *yī xìn*, a letter: a classifier must come between the article (a) and the noun, that is, *yī fēng xìn*, in which *fēng* is the classifier signifying “a sealed object” and which is specialized as a morpheme obligatorily accompanying the word *xìn*, letter. Obviously, there is no way we can translate into French the word *fēng*, because no French-speaking person would dream of saying “a—sealed object—letter”! Inversely, it is totally impossible to use the verb *être*, to be, as a translation of the Chinese auxiliary “to be” in the statement, “*il est venu hier*,” without ending up with a

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sense of focalization that is not that of the original French statement: “*c’est hier qu’il est venu*”! The auxiliary *être*, to be, is not used in Chinese to express the recent past, as it is in French. Another example,² to stay within the Far Eastern area, is that of the forms of politeness proper to the speech of Kyoto women, and that the author Y. Kawabata has some of his heroines use in his novel *Kyoto*. It is almost impossible in any case to translate forms of politeness from Japanese without recourse to paraphrases, but what about the fact that from these translations the receiver must recognize these forms as being particular to women, and to women of a certain region of Japan? Can one do otherwise than give an explanatory note, that infra-text of admission or regret which the translator avoids with all his might? Now, in Japanese, the formal indices in question are not just decorations: they are an integral part of morphology, of a difficult zone of the language. In other words, whatever is an indication of belonging to a certain sex or social status will be found in one idiom assigned to grammar, expressed by forms inscribed in paradigms and deriving from the strictest code, while in another idiom, it will be the situation between the interlocutors that gives the indication, with no properly linguistic mark corresponding to it.

We see all the information to be drawn from these phenomena. Some languages have integrated sexual and social relationships into their grammar, while others have left them with no particular mark. And it is the activity of translation that serves here to show the irreducibility of morphology at the same time as the diversity of the semantic territories it covers.

We learn something else here, also, and the information is of great importance for what it reveals about the nature of languages. Contrary to what the adversaries of translation imagine, too happy to find arguments in the aporetic situation where the translator is frequently in danger of straying, *everything can be translated*, and ever since human societies have existed who were estranged because of language, who came into contact and confronted each other with what was irreducible to them, everything has always

² For more details, see C. Hagege, *La structure des langues*, Paris, 1986, pp. 78-79 and *id. L’homme de paroles, Contribution linguistique aux sciences humaines*, Paris, Fayard, 1985, pp. 46-50.

been translated. If then languages differ from each other, it is not through what they can or cannot express, since all of them may, using various means, with more or less success, express no matter what. *If languages are different, it is through what some are obliged to say and others cannot say*, and reciprocally. The restrictions of morphology they run up against and that are revealed by translation irrevocably characterize distinct types of languages.

What is true of morphology is also true of syntax. Here it is a matter of the components of languages concerning relationships between the units of the statement, such as they are found marked in various ways, word order, for one. But what seems most interesting for our purpose is the problem of dividing tasks between grammar and vocabulary. This might just as well have been treated above, referring to morphology, but we treat it here because it is more general than the study of the categories of words. Two examples may suffice, the first borrowed from Bulgarian and the second from Hungarian. We know that one of the particularities of Bulgarian is to have developed means of expression from what has long been called testimonial, or rather, non-testimonial, since these forms refer to events the speaker presents as having happened without his being a witness to them. It would be more appropriate to speak of indirect narration. In any case, the difference between Bulgarian, or other Slavic languages, and French, for example, is that in Bulgarian a veritable paradigm is set up, a coherent ensemble of grammatical forms, while the other languages we mentioned use lexical means to express the same content. For the translator, then, it is a question of choosing one of these means when he must render a Bulgarian text, since he does not find regular inflexions in the language he is translating into (unless it is Turkish, Quechuan or Kwakiutl, not probable from a Bulgarian text, and languages equally furnished with paradigms of indirect narration). Thus he must translate by the intercalation of a *verbum dicendi*, a "simple" verbal form such as *doxoždala*, which would be rendered as "*elle est venue, m'a-t-on dit*"; or he must use a subordinate structure after a declarative verb: "*on m'a dit qu'elle était venue*," which is obviously much more tedious than a single verb form. In Slavic languages other than Bulgarian, the idea of indirect narration is not necessarily expressed by an inserted or dominant declarative verb, since there

are morphemes that have precisely that “non-testimonial” value: Russian *mol, de, deskat*’; Ukrainian *mov, movljav*; Byelorussian *mou, mauljau*; Czech *pry*; Slovak *vraj*; Polish *pono, podobno*; Serbo-Croatian *bajagi, tobože*; Slovenian *baje*. But here again, there is no verbal paradigm of indirect narration, and thus we must entrust to these lexical processes what Bulgarian ascribes to the inflected verbal syntagm.

Hungarian gives another interesting illustration. As we know, it is by an opposition between a form called objective and one called subjective, in conjugation, that this language treats the difference between the transitivity applied to a defined patient on the one hand and on the other, either intransitivity or transitivity applied to an undefined patient. We may assume from that that proper nouns in the accusative, a mark whose use is governed by that of the transitive verb, require the objective conjugation since, logically, there is no noun more definite than a proper noun, necessarily referring to a specific and unique individual. Now, it is possible to have a proper noun in the accusative preceded by a verb in the subjective form. The effect obtained is the following: while the objective conjugation places the object in the foreground, the subjective conjugation effaces or derhematizes it, since it is treated as though the verb were intransitive and had no object, to the degree in which it is applied as much to the intransitive construction as to the indefinite object. With an object represented by a proper noun, for example, we get:³ *olvassunk Balzacet* (let us read, subjective conjugation; Balzac, accusative) as opposed to *olvassuk Balzac-et* (let us read, objective conjugation; Balzac, accusative). For the speaker of Hungarian, the difference between the two meanings, expressed paradigmatically in the morphosyntax of the language, is perfectly clear. It is not the same thing when it is a question of translating into French, for example. How can we render this difference, one that concerns a disindividualized object in opposition to an object taken in itself, if not by using complicated glosses whose precision does not alleviate the awkwardness? The author from whom I borrow these examples

³ See G. Kassai, contribution on the theme, “Grammaire textuelle et grammaire fonctionnelle,” in *Actes du XIe Colloque Intl. de Linguistique fonctionnelle*, Bologna, 1984; Padova, CLESP, 1985, pp. 51-52 (49-54).

suggests a translation for this opposition which could give, but imperfectly, this pair: *Let us read Balzac; Let us read some Balzac* (in which, let it be said in passing, we note that the partitive article in French gives a defined complement used with the objective conjugation, just because it is the French way of indicating that it is a matter of the individual Balzac himself). This is a much more complicated translation but one which at least reflects what is implied here with the opposed use of the two kinds of conjugations: *Let us read the books Balzac has written* (for the first statement, with a subjective conjugation) and *Let us read what this man has put into his books of his personality, his character, his intimate nature*.

This difference between languages with respect to morphosyntax is without serious consequence for the destiny of countries when it is only a question of translating literary texts as accurately as possible. But serious problems may arise when the texts being considered are political. A famous example is that of the well-known Resolution 242 of the United Nations. As we know, the State of Israel considers the English version of this resolution as authoritative, while for the Arab States it is the French version. What can explain these positions? Quite simply, a point of grammar that entails a political choice of decisive importance for peace in the Near East. The first of the two principles considered in the resolution as implied by the Charter of the United Nations is given in English as “withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict,” while the French version is “*retrait des forces armées israéliennes des territoires occupés lors du récent conflit*.” On November 22, 1967, the date of the resolution, the situation was as follows: the Israeli forces occupied a certain number of territories that before the beginning of hostilities were under the jurisdiction of three of Israel’s neighbors: Egypt, Jordan and Syria. It was thus essential to know if the international assembly required the withdrawal from all these territories or only a part of them. In this case, French must specify which option is concerned, because it obligatorily distinguishes two uses: the plural definite joined with *de* to form *des* or the partitive plural article. In English, in this case, the absence of the definite article *the* is authorized and is equivalent in sense to either a definite and totalizing meaning (withdrawal of armed forces from

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the occupied territories) or to a partitive sense, that is, partial (withdrawal of armed forces *from* occupied territories). we can easily see the responsibility the translator must assume faced with what can be misunderstood through the Byzantine subtleties of grammar!

In all the cases we have mentioned, the exercise of translation demonstrates the restrictions in language systems. But if it is according to the diachronic axis that we examine the data, then we may see translation at work in the shaping of characteristic traits of languages that it helps to create just because it introduces traits from other languages. The history of language offers many examples of the evolution of morphosyntax under the influence of a foreign language with which people are in regular contact and from which they introduce structures into their own tongue simply because they translate them, consciously or not. The expression of the complement of agent was introduced into Arabic in this way from English and French, and into Turkish from Arabic. The same is true for the frequent use of the subject pronoun in Chinese and Japanese, introduced from English, or for the development of an “article” in oral Finnish on the model of Swedish. Finally, this accounts for the emergence of an *avoir* possessive structure gradually replacing *être* in many languages, such as Israelian Hebrew influenced by translations from English and French.⁴

TRANSLATION AND THE LESS DIFFICULT PARTS: VOCABULARY

Vocabulary is topological.⁵ It is open to borrowing, and the activity of translating serving, here again, as a test, clearly shows that it is much less difficult to put lexical contents from one language into another than to introduce into one what is in the other a grammatical order, and obligatory. Since lexical contents are not necessarily attached to categories of language and when it is technically or semantically more practicable, we can always translate a form by an order or a succession of words, a verb by

⁴ See C. Hagège, *L'homme de paroles*, *op.cit.*, p. 249.

⁵ For more details on this point, see Ch. II of Hagège, *Le français et les siècles*, soon to appear in Editions Odile Jacob, 1987.

an adjective, a noun by a verbal expression, a term by a paraphrase, and so on. Since vocabulary is an open field, as translation so clearly shows, it is also the part of languages over which this latter has more control. What we have just seen with regard to diachronic syntax and transfer of structures such as the passage from *être* to *avoir* is obviously much more true for vocabulary. Grammar presents many more problems, because we do not translate word for word except when we can, and the obligatory morphemes in one case (languages with noun classes, those with the verb conjugated according to the person) which are absent in another (languages without nominal classes or with a verb that is never conjugated according to person) inevitably escape from word-to-word translating. Translation is thus once again a test full of information for linguistics.

In this case the information is still more precise, since even though we are no longer in the field of the obligatory, as we are in grammar, there are still difficulties. This appears markedly in the history of the greatest undertaking in translation of all time, an undertaking that has profoundly influenced the destiny of many languages: the translation of the Bible. From Armenian to Bulgarian, by way of Gothic and Judaeo-Spanish, the vocabulary and phraseology of these languages received a decisive imprint from translations from Hebrew, Greek or Latin. For languages that are not as close to the original ones, this same enterprise has not been totally successful, for example, in the case of Chinese. It has been shown⁶ that the Jesuit fathers, among whom was the famous Matteo Ricci, did not really succeed, in spite of their efforts, in accrediting the expressions they found to translate the ideas of “God,” “substance,” and “change” that is, respectively, “master of Heaven” (*tiāndì*), “what is established through itself” (*zìlìzhě*) and “what depends on something else” (*yǐlài-zhě*). From the Chinese point of view, the distinctions involved here were completely artificial and gratuitous, for the simple reason that the language did not provide anything similar. It seems, then, that the ability of the lexicon to borrow through translation is limited by the mechanisms that the lexical associations within a language feed into the intellectual habits of its speakers. We find, therefore, in a

⁶ See J. Gernet, *Chine et christianisme, action et réaction*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987.

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pair of languages too distant from each other in space and time, apories in the lexicon that we thought were reserved to transfers of syntaxes. Here a major property of human languages is strikingly confirmed: they are bound to the cultures they represent by a rapport of diachronically reciprocal influences, namely, *the culture of a human group fashions its language* by giving it, over a period of time, traits in which this culture is clearly reflected. But *following an inverse movement, language creates modes of expression that feed modes of thought*, and the representations thus produced may, in extreme cases, be an obstacle to translation. It is not only languages that are translated; it is also intellectual processes.

That said, translation has always been possible, even if it is often awkward, and expressions that at first seemed unusual or not representing what we are generally accustomed to have ended, with some exceptions, by being accepted. The Chinese example we have just given is one of these exceptions. We must counter it with innumerable cases of successful translations or those beginning to be accepted in another undertaking that does not concern the Bible but the adaptation of vocabularies to new ideas and modern technology. The young developing States which have just recently achieved independence have had the choice between *obscure international borrowing* and the *nationalist clarity of the gloss*, with intermediary solutions such as imitation in autochthonous material. In other words, many African or Polynesian languages could designate the airplane as [erplen] by pure and simple borrowing from the English word. On the other hand, they could translate with the local equivalent of the expression “flying pirogue,” which at least, through its roots, through a process of formation and exploiting the meaning—which says something to its speakers—was not as unclear as a more or less international English term. This is the nationalist solution that has most often been adopted by Swahili, for example by translating “botanical” as *elimu + mimea*, science of vegetation. In addition, Turkish or Hebrew could give an example to the languages of the young nations enriching their technical vocabulary, since they both have exploited autochthonous roots as often as they could. This has sometimes been at the price of approximations that resembled plays on words but has served, especially when there was the

chance of a resemblance that was both formal and semantic between the rejected foreign word and the local word that was chosen and fortunately entered the language as a neologism. Thus in Turkish *école* is *okul*, from the root *oku* (read); *social* is *soysal*, from *soy*, race; in Hebrew, *elite* is *ilit*, from *ili*, superior; Hungarian furnishes another example: *element* is *elem*, from *elo*, what is ahead, plus “*m*.”

We see then that whatever ways are chosen and even if the result is not always felicitous, it is always possible to translate as far as vocabulary is concerned. All that is needed is good will. History gives some cases of perfidious translations dictated by particular political concerns. One example is that of the treaty signed December 17, 1885 between the French plenipotentiaries and the representatives of the Queen of Madagascar, intended to put an end to a year and a half of hostilities. This treaty, prelude to the French protectorate over the island, contained a passage that was the source of different interpretations, leading to conflicts since it was simply a matter of knowing if the country would or would not be independent. The Malagasy text, translated from a French original, says that France will “watch over the relations of Madagascar with *ny fanjakana any ivelany*,” this Malagasy syntagm literally meaning “outside” or “foreign” governments. Now France, using the second meaning, understood that only its resident general could accredit foreign consuls, while the Malagasy ministers, using the first meaning, considered that only the Queen was qualified in this respect, France only representing Madagascar’s interests abroad.⁷ The stakes were not small: the official interpretation of France led directly to the French protectorate over Madagascar.

We could multiply the examples, add other arguments. The activity of translating is not only the daily practice of the professional linguist. It is rich in revelations on the profound nature of languages. We have not given much attention here to all that the great translations teach us about the history of the profession and the way its practice has adapted itself to the willingness of the

⁷ I thank M.J. Faublée, professor of Malagasy for having helped me to identify the Malagasy version.

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public to accept what is offered them in translations from foreign texts. The translation of the *Thousand and One Nights* by A. Galland in 1704 provides an interesting illustration of this subject. When we study it closely, we see that the often considerable differences with regard to the original text in Arabic did not at all mean that Galland was not well versed in Arabic. On the contrary, his marginal notes on the manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale show for many passages a concern for exactness and a knowledge of Arabic that was quite remarkable. However, at that time of beautiful infidels the translation gave us a conception entirely governed by the need to serve the public nourishment suited to its taste and not to shock it with crudities it could not digest.⁸ The situation is quite the contrary today.

But if at the price of some infidelity we may thus translate from any language into any other, whatever type of text, it is just because a common basis links them all. After that, we understand that the linguist is greatly interested in translation: its possibility is a major entry in the dossier of the search for the universals.

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⁸ For more details on this point, see Hagège, "Traitement du sens et fidélité dans l'adaptation classique: sur le texte arabe des *Mille et une nuits* et la traduction de Galland," *Arabica*, Vol XXVII, 2, pp. 114-139.