

PROLEGOMENA FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT
OF A GENERAL THEORY
OF TRANSLATION

Is a theory of translation possible?

During the past ten or twenty years this question has begun to concern a great many thinkers. The interest which it holds for our time is not only of an academic order. The vigorous growth of various forms of teaching of translation and interpreting; and the setting under way of gigantic programs of translation by electronic machines (to cite only two "spectacular" facts) illustrate its practical importance.

Now, if an enormous amount has been written, in general and in particular, about this central question, it is all the more essential that the problem be posed with all necessary rigor. With regard to this subject there is no definition, no distinction, no methodological question which does not give rise to disagreement of principles:¹ in short, there reigns only an inextricable confusion.

Translated by Sidney Alexander.

¹ Is translation an art (Theodore H. Savory, *The Art of Translation*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1957 — Antokolski et al., *The Art of Translation (Masterstvo*

The following article represents an attempt to focus the discussion and circumscribe the field. It will not be surprising to find in it more questions than answers: what is important at the present time is that the inquiry take place on solid ground and within very strict limits.

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Over the centuries, translation has been conceived of as a function bearing especially on the spoken language. All ancient terms designating this function are connected with the idea of speech.² Hermes, the god of fine speakers—orators, lawyers,—is also the

perevoda), Moscow, 1959); a science (Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, U.S.A., in publication); should it be studied as a branch of stylistics (Vinay and Darbelnet, *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais — Méthode de traduction*, Paris, Didier, 1958)? Should one conceive of it, above and beyond the variation of types, as a linguistic operation, thereby studying it within the framework of linguistics (Andrei V. Fedorov, *Introduction to a Theory of Translation*, Moscow, 1953) or, on the contrary, is it necessary to carry on such studies within the framework of literary research when it is a question of literary translation (Antokolski et al., *Problems of Literary Translation (Voprosy khudozhestvennogo perevoda)*, Moscow, 1955)? Does analysis of literary translation (Georges Mounin, *Les belles infidèles*, Paris, Cahiers du Sud, 1955 — Reuben A. Brower et al., *On Translation*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1959), scientific and technical translation (R. W. Jumpelt, *Die Uebersetzung naturwissenschaftlicher und technischer Literatur*, Berlin, Langenscheidt, 1961), or automatic translation (Anthony G. Oettinger, *Automatic Language Translation*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1960) lead to the theory of translation?

² "Truchement" ("interpreter") comes from *tardjouman* (drogman) which goes back to the Assyrian *ragamou* (to speak). In Chinese "to translate" (*i**) is composed of the sign *i*** (to observe, to lead) and of *yen**** which means "word", "to speak". In Latin, the usual word is *interpres*, and St. Jerome has left us a *De optimo*

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generis interpretandi which deals with translation in general. Martin Luther, in his *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen* (a family of words relating to Middle *talami* and which has given us *tolmatch* in Russian (equivalent to the French "truchement"), *thumacz* in Polish etc.) states specifically: "It is not literature which should be consulted... but the mother at the hearth, the children in the street, the common man in the marketplace, looking them in the mouth to see how they are speaking—that is where translating begins."

A General Theory of Translation

god of interpreters. Perhaps most of all: the verb *hermeneuein* refers exclusively to the act of interpreting.

The distinction established today between "translating" (written texts) and "interpreting" (oral) is recent. It was the Renaissance which enthroned the book in our civilization. So much so that the written word has supplanted the spoken word and "translation" has come to be considered as a higher species and "interpreting" as an inferior activity.³

How can we explain the fact that the spoken word played a more important role than the written word for so long a period and that language has always been felt as the act of speaking, and only very subordinately as the act of writing? Does the explanation reside in the fact that for millennia the great mass of the population was illiterate? That is undoubtedly true, and is a truth which must be kept in mind every time one turns one's attention toward the earliest epochs or towards societies where education remains very limited.

José Ortega y Gasset cogently reminds us that it is still necessary to be careful not to deduce by simplistic reasoning from the factor of mass illiteracy that written language is somehow superior to spoken language. "... Reading a book is... a utopistic need ... 'to read' implies the intention of fully understanding a text. Now, of course, that is impossible... A book is an act of speaking which has been fixed, 'petrified;' ... the authentic act of speaking... is that which grows out of a situation, as a reaction to it. Uprooted from its original situation, the 'saying' alone is only half of itself... The better we know how to read, the more we will feel the spectral sadness of the written word, without any voice to express it, without the living flesh to incarnate it and concretize it. Goethe was right in declaring that the written word is a substitute, a poor *Ersatz* of the spoken word." (*Diogenes*, No. 28, 1959)

³ Describing "interpreting" in his own fashion, an American author (K. W. H. Scholz, *The Art of Translation*, Philadelphia, 1918) concludes: "Translation is more than that. It properly begins where interpreting ends." The phenomenon of interpreting at conferences and the development of international contacts have somewhat shaken this final assurance. With the help of radio and cinema may we not look forward to a renewal of spoken civilization?

Translating a written text is always only a makeshift. What one has opposite oneself is only a pale, incomplete and deformed reflection of what the author wanted to say,—and what every translator tries, more or less conscientiously, to recapture.

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Historically, the first conclusive mention that can be found of translation systematically exercised is borne by the Elephantine inscriptions (5th-6th dynasties in Egypt). The princes of this city carried the title of "Chief Interpreters" of the Pharaohs. Toward the year 2350 before our era, one of them, Herkouf, led an expedition "into the lands of Imaou", among the Blacks, taking along a dwarf named Deng. One may follow these princes in their missions toward the desert courses, toward Nubia, Sinai and the seas bordering Asia.

These dignitaries are the ancestors of a long, ever flourishing line of translators and "duty" interpreters who operate in administrations and general staffs, consulates and courts of justice. Over the course of the centuries they have played, and continue to play, a considerable role.

What we note, first of all, about them is that the loyalty to which they are bound goes entirely to their chief, their sovereign, their captain. Military interpreters act "for the benefit of the Command." According to current rules, they are "the valuable auxiliaries of the Command" and "their role lies in rendering comprehensible, by means of translation, the writings and documents of all orders which might be captured from the enemy."

This attitude with regard to a text reflects a very ancient and tenacious attitude with regard to language itself.

The way in which, today, we voluntarily pretend to view language only as a more or less practical tool, a "vehicle" serving "communication" which the translator, with total impersonality, is simply obliged to set on other rails, was certainly unknown to our ancestors. For them, language was a means of acting on reality. The Sumerian who proclaimed a deed was persuaded that he was giving life to that deed; in conferring a name on something, he was investing that thing with the properties connected with that name. In ancient China, to know a name, to

A General Theory of Translation

speak a word, was to possess the being, to create the thing. Every beast was tamed by whoever knew how to name him. One will have tigers for soldiers if one calls them "tigers." To organize a country's government, the first measure to be taken is to "correctly render the designations" as Confucius said.

Hence, the people are trained to speak "the" language, whose usage will make men of them. All peoples have instinctively felt that they alone were speaking a human language. The Slavs called themselves such because they alone possessed the *slovo*, the word, foreigners being "mutes" (*nemtsi*). "Barbarians" are not men.

A prince of Wey had dwelt among the Barbarians for a long time. Having returned to his country he took pleasure in still speaking their language. "He will not avoid his fate," was the opinion of his subjects, "he will die among the Barbarians." The *ming*, a term which designates vocal or graphic symbols is scarcely distinguished from that which designates life and destiny. The Barbarians live beyond the space organized by the language of men, and thereby partake of the nature of beasts. To barter away one's language for theirs is to exchange one's qualities as a man for their qualities as beasts. (M. Granet, *La pensée chinoise*, Paris, 1934, pp. 41, 49, 35 et passim).

The language of a people is its soul just as truly as its gods are. It is captured like booty. It is a prize which one delivers, in paying homage to a prince.

Traduttore, traditore. The old adage is certainly more than a play of gratuitous words. The translator arouses distrust. To most people, he is a deserter.

The dragoman Younous beg, who died in 1542 and who constructed the mosque of the dragomen at Constantinople, was of Greek origin. His successor Ahmad was Viennese, his true name being Heinz Tulman. Mourad beg, a Hungarian, captured at Mohacz, composed a treatise on Islamic apologetics and a tri-lingual hymn. The Turks were resigned to leaving the functions of the dragoman as a quasi-monopoly of Greek families, even non-converted. Certain of these families, such as the Mavrocordato, played an eminent role against their masters in the struggle for independence.

Under Hitler, translation services were performed by "people

unknown on the outside and very badly looked upon on the inside." They worked in the Hotel Adlon, "hermetically separated from the outside world; their telephone lines were cut, access to their floors was guarded, and vigilant policemen posted under the windows guaranteed that the island would remain an island." (P. Schmidt, *Ma figuration auprès d'Hitler*, Paris, 1950, p. 235).

The activity of translation is suspect. Isn't it a kind of monstrosity, an act against nature, since every foreign language is outside of the bounds of the human. In fact, we have seen the prince of Elephantine taking along a dwarf. Calumny garbed St. Jerome as a woman. Legend shows us the Toungouzes seizing one of them who had become an interpreter among the Russians: "Man with two languages! You will perish under our eyes to expiate your crime!" The decree is mitigated however, when they ascertain that he really has only one language behind his teeth (I. Menchikov, "Legend of the Taouli of the Pyrerko Clan, in *Man seeks Happiness*, Moscow, 1946, pp. 30-31).

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"To possess two languages" constitutes a monstrous anomaly. However, isn't the capacity to speak the language of the beasts an Orphic gift, the faculty of a superman? Moreover, non-human language might be, not bestial, but divine.

The existence of a language of the gods is a widespread belief. There is hardly a religion which has not taken advantage of it. Latin and Slavonic church languages bear witness to it. The holy books of the Pön religion of the high plateaus of Tibet are indited in the language of men, that is to say, in Tibetan, but the headings, in which are concentrated the transcendent efficacy of the verses, are noted in two "languages of the gods", probably artificial and, at the present time, incomprehensible. (G. de Roerich, *Sur les pistes de l'Asie centrale*, Paris, 1933, p. 204).

"For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God," declares Saint Paul (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, XIV, 2) To know the language of the gods is to possess the key to the world of mystery. Is not the *pontifex*, caster of bridges, also assigned the task of connecting the human

A General Theory of Translation

and the divine? Isn't it the priest's function to translate the sacred texts to the faithful and interpret the oracles?

This is what makes us realize the weakness of current distinctions. Isn't all reading in a hieroglyphic language already a translation? Was the Egyptian priest who "read" a text to the faithful doing anything different than the Egyptologist who deciphers and translates the same text for us? Accustomed to using phonetic languages supposedly free of all cryptic elements, we find it difficult, in those countries with obligatory primary education, to perceive in the act of reading anything else than a mechanical accomplishment, and we picture to ourselves magnificent civilizations capable of developing with non-phonetic writing and illiterate masses. To "lip-read" a text, it was necessary to know something other than rules of pronunciation. It could not be read without a comprehension of the meaning, without a gloss and "interpretation."

From then on, how could the idea of translation be defined? The Chinese language, ideographic in origin, poses an analogous problem up to our own day. The reading of a Chinese text also constitutes, to some degree, a translation. Pronunciation varies according to province and century: the traditional writing remains invariable, presenting itself as a kind of algebra of the language. From this follow various consequences for Chinese civilization: for instance, might this not be the reason for the important role played by the class of *liverati* and the traditional value accorded philological play? Hasn't this also resulted in relatively little activity in the field of translations from other languages?

In our time, a double process is developing under our eyes. Language, even written language, has abjured its traditional qualities, and is drawing closer to the spoken language (*pai-houa*, to speak clearly); on the other hand, there has been a decision on principle to pass over to phonetic writing. And, at the same time, we see taking place in the ancient land of the Han a burst of activity in translation *stricto sensu*.

The foregoing considerations make us realize the important role which religious translation has played alongside official utilitarian translation; from the earliest times onward.

Conservators of traditions and consecrated dogmas, religions

have always had a predilection for instructing their ministers in ancient languages, raised to the status of holy tongues. The priests of Babylonia transmitted the Sumerian tradition by means of writing. At the time of the great ethnic movements of the early Middle Ages, the use of Latin was preserved by the monasteries. The Russian priests began by becoming initiated in Slavonic.

In order to spread, religions have sought to communicate their doctrines to peoples of different languages. The religion of Mani foresaw from the beginning that it would be preached "in all languages, in all countries" and we know translations and multiple redactions of it, but no original text. Under the heading "interpreter", the *Encyclopédie* of philosophy judiciously points out that "in the churches of Palestine, where half the people spoke Greek, and the other half spoke Syriac, in those of Africa where the Punic language was still used by some, while Latin was familiar to others, necessarily there had to be interpreters." Inevitably, technical problems of translation became of concern. In the *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Saint Paul, who possessed the gift of tongues and of "making interpretations", provides a veritable set of rules of procedure for multi-lingual meetings: not to speak without an interpreter, to allow the latter time to interpret one speech after another, etc. If Saint Jerome, the author of the *Vulgate*, is considered the patron saint of translators, Saint Paul may be put forward as the patron saint of interpreters at conferences.

The spread of Buddhism, for its part, provides one of the most remarkable chapters of the phenomenon with which we are here concerned. Born in the 6th to the 5th centuries B.C., the primitive Canon was undoubtedly drawn up in Magadhi. Even while Buddha was alive, the question had been raised with regard to the purity of the dogma as it passed into other idioms. The Master had decided: "I authorize you, brothers, to teach the words of the Buddha each in your own language." And the disciples took practical measures to organize the interpretation (in a linguistic sense) of his discourse. The Canon was quickly codified and translated into Pali (at the time of Asoka), into Sanscrit (under Kanichka) and, probably, from the earliest times, into other languages. The first Chinese translations must have

A General Theory of Translation

been derived from the pre-Asokian canons, different from the Pali and Sanscrit (Cf. P. C. Bagchi, "On the Original Buddhism, Its Canon and Language", *Sino-Indian Studies*, II, Oct. 1946-Jan. 1947, Pts 3-4).

Chinese tradition places the introduction of Buddhism into China toward 61-64 A.D. and speaks of a "monastery of the white Horse", situated at the gates of Lo-yang, where the labor of translation is supposed to have begun. At any rate, in the 2nd century, a Buddhist community was prospering at Lo-yang concentrating on the translation of the holy books. Texts which were translated there have come down to us, together with the names of the translators. The first of the team to arrive in China (in 148 A.D.) is said to have been a Parthe, son of a king, by the name of Ngan Che-kao. A colophon dating from 179 A.D. describes the method followed: "The Hindu Bodhisatva Tchou Cho-fo recites the text. The Bodhisatva Yue-tche Tche Tch'an transmits the word, giving it to Meng Fou. Tchang Lien then set it down with the brush" (H. Maspéro, "The Origins of the Buddhist Community of Lo-yang," *Jour. Asiat.* VII-IX 1934).

One may imagine the difficulties encountered in this disconnected operation. The reciter and the commentator (foreigners) of the sacred text were hardly in a position to verify the correctness of the translation which the Chinese was making as he dictated his version to the scribe. The Chinese literati were influenced by Taoist thought, which was in some aspects close to the new teaching. Taoism served as a vehicle for Buddhism but adulterated it. Nirvana became "non-action"; when the Buddha received the illumination, he "discovered the Tao" etc.

From the end of the 2nd century on, a close exegesis had become necessary. Similarly, problems of translation and exegesis would play a considerable role in the history of Christianity, from the time of the Septuagint, Origen, and Saint Jerome up to the battles of the Renaissance and the successive versions of the Bible in English.

The prestige of the "authorized version" in the history of the English language is known. Furthermore, in all cultures to some degree, the birth of an autonomous language is manifested through translations of religious texts.

Thirty years before the Declaration of Strassbourg, a council

meeting at Tours (in 812) prescribed setting Latin homilies into the "rustic" language. Merovingian glossaries contain juxtalinear types of translations for the use of clergy lacking in instruction. Similarly, in England one finds glossaries dating from the 7th century; in the 10th century, King Alfred translated the holy texts; in the 11th century, Aelfric took on the challenge of the Bible. Toward the year 1000, Notker Labeo set the Biblical text into the Germanic tongue, earning the surname of "the German". In the 9th century, Saints Cyril and Methodius had evangelized the Slavs, providing them with a form of writing and translating the book of ritual of the Sacraments. In the same way, the Mongol alphabet goes back to Phagpa who had introduced books of the Buddhist faith into the Country of the Grasslands (13th century). The alphabets of dozens of tribes today are due to missionary translators. Bible societies constitute an immense translation enterprise and put out a specialized publication, *The Bible Translator*.

For the subject which concerns us, therefore, religious translation has played a capital role. If, looked at from the outside, the Church translator differs very little from the translator of the palace or military camp, his attitude with regard to the text confided to him is radically different. For him, the original text is not a kind of plunder which he is free to tear to pieces, a trophy which he delivers as homage to a man. What he is translating is the word of God, to which he owes respect. He confronts it with humility: the original text is what commands.

This respect may take forms which seem extravagant to us. Translators might be ordered to keep exactly to the number of words in each sentence. Is this really absurd? If each word is of divine essence, it is indispensable to translate each word, no more, no less. If the text has a more hermetic content, if, for example, there are numeric significances deriving from the values attributed to each letter which weigh over everything, this subjection is still more rigid. These holding to strict word-by-word translation have always held a high place in the Churches, and their arguments are far from negligible. Already in the 16th century Fulke composed a "Defense of sincere and faithful translation of the Holy Scriptures" in order to clear himself of the reproach for not having servilely observed the word count

A General Theory of Translation

of the original. The famous precept of Saint Jerome "*non verbum e verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu*" thus takes on its full meaning. It constitutes a point of view, a judgment brought to bear on what one should be faithful to. If we really think about it, Jerome's precept is very audacious: what the translator is gathering is the Word of God; where, then, does he get the assurance to set himself up as a judge of the meaning contained in those words?

The problems of fidelity and freedom, of word-by-word and translation according to meaning, are here posed with particular acuity. All translators of the Holy Books have rendered and re-rendered them with anguish. Right in the century of the "beautiful betrayals" the gentlemen of Port-Royal wrote those lines which hardly find any parallel in France where, since Amyot, the need for clarity was law: "How do I know if I have not done something there against God's design? I have striven to free the Holy Scriptures of obscurity and roughness, and up to now God wanted His word to be swathed in obscurity" (de Saci, 1683. Quoted by B. Munteano, "Port-Royal et la stylistique de la traduction", *Cab. de l'Ass. Int. des Etudes fr.*, 8, 1956).

Thus we have arrived at the heart of a theoretical debate. Is it possible to speak of a theory of translation without thinking of Saint Jerome or Luther? Thanks to these, such a theory began to be set up. In China also the obligation of scrupulously translating holy texts made it possible to work out imperatives of a general order. By chance the detailed account of a meeting in the T'ang epoch has come down to us, a work meeting wherein were gathered the great Buddhist translator Hiuan Tsang and the Taoists Ts'ai-houang and Tch'eng-ying, authors of a Sanscript version of the Tao te-king. While the Taoists doctors tried to combine both philosophies, Hiuan Tsang, without ever once ceasing to be extremely courteous, stressed the analysis of content as much as form, imposed necessary distinctions, thereby imparting an orientation to the task of translation which endowed it with theoretical value.

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Up to this point we have not spoken about literary translation.

Does this mean that the latter was totally absent during the earliest periods, when theoretical ideas with regard to translation were already being sketched out?

It would be hazardous to assert this. Undoubtedly, at the dawn of time, there did not exist literature and literary translation such as we may conceive them today. Nevertheless, beginning with earliest antiquity, migrations of tales and epics from one country to another, from one language to another, may be definitely ascertained.

The epic of Gilgamesh has come down to us in its Babylonian version from the times of Hammurabi, as well as in Sumerian, Hittite and Hourite versions. Some passages of Homer are said to reveal echoes of it. But in this example where does religion end and literature begin?

Conforming more strictly to our definitions is, for example, the famous *Roman d'Alexandre* which passed from Latin to French (thereby sanctioning "Alexandrian" verse), to English, to German, to the Slavic languages, to Syrian, to Armenian, Ethiopian, Arabic, Persian.... *Iskander* has entered into oriental legend. Scholars have even felt they recognized an ultimate avatar of the great emperor in the *Kesar* whose epoch constitutes one of the sacred texts of the Pön religion of Tibet.

In this case, literature would seem to have insinuated itself into religion. Certainly this is what happened with Barlaam and Josaphat. Their "Lives", translated toward the thirteenth century into French from a Latin text going back, by way of Arabian, to Middle East origins, reached such an influence over minds that the Catholic Church admitted both of them among the number of its saints.

Similarly, with regard to the thousands of fables, tales, stories whose reappearances are the delight of students of comparative literature. Gods and kings have perhaps taken precedence over writers and poets; have they always been more important than bards, tellers of lovely tales? The latter simply lacked the honors of writing and have not left us "monuments". Only by way of hypotheses is it possible for us to explore their significance.

To judge by the disguises and travesties of a *Roman de Renart* and so many other tales, it would seem that the transmission took place by way of adaptation, even by a new creation on

A General Theory of Translation

a given theme. In the 13th century a certain Calandre had "enromacié" (that is to say, placed into the "Romance" language, into "vulgar" French) a treatise on Latin history (Orose) into seven thousand lines of verse. Chaucer and Chrétien de Troyes had to some degree translated, to some degree adapted, to some degree freely embroidered on a theme or composed according to their own individual inspiration. In their eyes, weren't all these operations intermingled? Couldn't one wonder if the humble bard who was paraphrasing into another language a text which had attracted him, was not often being more faithful than the scholar who, with pen in hand, felt called upon to perform the role of an author by reducing a chanted poem into writing.

Undoubtedly this confusion is inevitable when language is in its first babblings and does not yet possess a proper literature. As a general rule translation has preceded autonomous literary creation, it has been the great midwife of literatures. Thus, the Tibetan poet Milarepa had, as his master, the magician-translator Marpa (who like Saint Jerome has a book and a skull as his attributes).

In Rome, long before Virgil and Cicero, L. Livius Andronicus was translating Homer. Naeivius was translating and imitating the works of the Greek theatre. Ennius, who gave Rome its first national epic, was a translator; he spoke Greek, Latin and Osque and said that he had three hearts. It was thanks to the efforts of translators that classic Latin prosody was gradually elaborated.

In France modest translations (of religious inspiration) paved the way for more ambitious creations. The tales of Saint Eulalia, the Lives of Saint Léger and Saint Alexis, the first Passions, are pieces timidly set to verse (and often to music), and deriving from Latin models. It was on the basis of translation, and in terms of it, that Joachim du Bellay built up his *Défense et illustration de la langue française*.

The modest *jongleurs* who repeated the chants which they had heard, the scholars who were putting books of history into verse, the poets who prodded themselves on to emulation of the distinguished dead make pitiful figures alongside the pontiffs and diplomats. Nevertheless, they bring a gift to translation which no one else can offer it. They transform it into an art.

And from then on, if we want to know the theoretical views of succeeding centuries on this subject, we must search in innumerable "Arts of Translation."

What we call translation, in the most currently accepted sense of the term, derives from a double source: the humble rigor of translators of sacred texts joined with the free artistic research of the *litterati*. It is the synthesis of these two contradictory tendencies.

Literary translation has left an ineradicable mark upon all types of translation. Over the course of the centuries it has undergone a fabulous development. The greatest writers have not disdained to lend themselves to it. At present, in the realm of translation, it occupies first place by far. For the year 1960 the *Index translationum* published by UNESCO lists 31,230 titles translated all over the world, of which more than 17,000 alone, are classified under the heading of "literature". A great proportion of those listed in neighboring columns are really connected with it. It would be fair to assign two-thirds or three-quarters of the total to literary translation.

In our time, when one speaks simply of translation, most often it is literary translation which one has in mind. Nevertheless, the concept held about this remains rather blurry. The definitions put forth over various centuries, as well as the problems it had to face, vary a great deal. Even today agreement among all countries, and even among all authors of the same country, is very far from having been achieved.

From the very first, as we have seen, the question was raised regarding liberties which the translator may be authorized to take with the text. A first stage in which the author's name is often not even revealed (Alexander Dumas was still dealing with Russian literature in this way) might lead to what has been called the "belles infidèles" — the "lovely betrayals". The expression is Ménage's, and applies to Perrot d'Ablancourt; it characterizes a tendency which was widespread in France under Louis XIV—and in many other places at other times. Even in the 18th century, a Houdar de la Motte intended to produce an Iliad "as Homer would have written it in our time", in opposition to Mme Dacier who had taken the vow of strict fidelity.

The debate, however, between fidelity and liberty is eternal.

A General Theory of Translation

The Congress of the International Federation of Translators which met in 1959 to discuss the problem of "quality with regard to translation" resounded with it. These terms are relative. For the modern reader, Mme Dacier's "faithful" version is very little different from the "lovely betrayals". Wasn't she the one who replaced "pour madman" with "too magnanimous prince", and not having the courage to write "ass", transformed it into "As one sees the beast which is patient and sturdy but slow and lazy..."?

In our own day, between countries like the USSR and France, there reigns almost constant disagreement with regard to the most "obvious" methods of translation. For example, in Russia, translating poetry into prose is considered a sin of infidelity. There, people laugh at seeing proverbs rendered by equivalent proverbs in another tongue. The famous French "clarity", obligatory in French translation, is not at all held forth as the object of an adoration which is also fetishistic. "When that language [French] translates, it explains", marvelled Rivarol. Elsewhere he goes on to say that to explain is to falsify.

The relativity of these basic terms must never be forgotten. Nor, above all, that within a short time, the most sincere creeds turn into counter-truths. In translation especially, Hell is paved with good intentions.

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The triumph of rigor and exactitude may be seen in the way technical and scientific translation is practiced in our time. In this realm, the sacrosanct rules of elegance, or even simple grammatical correctness, pale beside the tyrannical need for precision of vocabulary and strict observance of the terminology proper to the subject.

In its contemporary acceptance, this genre is undoubtedly a late-comer.

Of course, the circulation of scientific texts is not a new phenomenon as such. But in remote antiquity, these weren't distinguished from religious and magic texts. The Babylonian priests wrote magical and medical prescriptions, treatises on divination and astrology, mathematical problems, etc. Babylonian alchemy

is thought to have spread to Hellenistic Egypt by way of *magi* in the service of Persian sovereigns, then by means of the Seleucid Greek dynasty. At the capture of Carthage, Scipio Aemilianus saved the twenty-eight volumes of Magon's Agricultural Treatise from the flames and brought them to Rome. The trophy was offered with great pomp to the Senate, which set up a committee to translate it. Subsequently, the work became the object of a veneration similar to that accorded the Sybilline books.

In the 18th century, translators dealt with great scholarly works in the same way as they dealt with literary or philosophical works. The problems which they dealt with bore most of all on qualities of elegance and style.

If we want to talk about scientific and technical translation as a distinct genre, in the current sense of the term, we have to think less about the kind of texts being translated than about a certain attitude with regard to them. In our time, as we have said, the requirements are reversed. Stylelessness and clumsy writing are forgiven a translator provided that the text produced be easily utilizable for its desired end. The attitude has become essentially pragmatic.

The phenomenon is important, because works of this kind are multiplying at a vertiginous rate. If, strictly speaking, they represent only a minority of the translations in the field of publishing, they dominate the enormous mass of documents translated outside of regular publishing—prospectuses, notices, articles, and studies, documents used within industry, commerce, laboratories, etc.

Is it necessary, however, to look upon this as a characteristic of our times? Isn't the truth rather that this kind of translation has existed from the most remote past, but that it has always been kept at the margin of those activities likely to leave a trace or deserve being mentioned? In its very humility, hasn't it been at all times the most current, the closest to the mass of mankind?

Think, for instance, of the obscure translators of markets and ports, encampments and highways, natural intermediaries for hundreds of practical operations difficult to identify. Has it ever been possible to do without them?

Not very much is known of the linguistic situation in pre-history. No matter how far back one goes in time, men of

A General Theory of Translation

different races and relationships between races are revealed. How did these contacts take place? Authors of antiquity as well as modern explorers attest to silent barter. But would it be correct to set up such a procedure as a rule? There are numerous allusions to the interpreters who accompany the merchants along the route or who act for them in the markets. It is possible to determine what was the *lingua franca* that reigned on the Silk Route in different periods.

By means of translators, it was possible not only to exchange banal phrases during a transaction in a bazaar, but also technical formulae and more generalized information. From one end of the Silk Route to the other, it is possible to follow the advance of certain inventions, passing irregularly along, sometimes in one direction, sometimes in another. The *Suwa Sutra* of India may be connected with Mediterranean ideas on geometry, the Arabs' knowledge of astronomy with those held in ancient China. The Taoist books contain descriptions of animals which bear a curious resemblance to those found in the works of Aristotle. Isn't it conceivable that "At the very beginning of the first Christian millennium a Greek-speaking Scyth acquainted with the Greek cities of the Black Sea and the books which were read in them, or a Greek-speaking Alan, *might* have conversed in some intermediate language of the steppes with a Chinese-speaking Hun. And a Romano-Syrian merchant *might* have learnt enough Chinese to give or receive ideas while in port at Canton". (J. Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, I, 233).

Certainly this pragmatic translation was different from modern technical translation, especially inasmuch as it was not trying to be strict. Exceptional circumstances were necessary before it could rise to a level worthy of being held in esteem. In those Arab or Syriac centers where there had been set up, during several centuries, a systematic effort at translations bearing, for the most part, on scientific works, such status is undoubtedly suggested. What was essentially lacking to it was the development of science and technique themselves, and the spirit which that development gave rise to, and generalized.

Besides, it lacked the help of certain indispensable tools: in this particular case, dictionaries.

Antiquity knew about the unilingual thesaurus. The Middle

Ages have left us glossaries, which are juxtilinear translations rather than dictionaries. Only in the 15th and 16th centuries was it truly realized that it was useful to set equivalences in other languages alongside the lists of words in the *thesaurus*. A Latin-French *Catholicon* dates from 1498. The *Dictionarium* by A. Calepin (which appeared in 1502) was quickly fitted into the same scheme. In 1539, Robert Estienne published a French-Latin dictionary. Dictionaries comparing the "vulgar" languages followed, according to the intensity of interchange. It was necessary to wait until 1786 to find a French-Russian dictionary; by 1704 a Slavonic Greek-Latin dictionary had been composed in Moscow.

The enthusiasm of the public stimulated the compiling of multi-lingual dictionaries. From 1550 we have a *Dictionnaire des huict langaiges* (Greek, Latin, Flemish, French, Spanish, Italian, English, German); dictionaries in eleven languages and more were to appear.

More significant in terms of its consequences was the fact that during the same period there appeared specialized dictionaries, which were to have a brilliant future as a result of the development of specific techniques. A dictionary of Greek-Latin medicine by Henri Estienne (1564), marine dictionaries, etc. Works of this order were to provide the ranks for current lexicography.

The burst of scientific and technical translation developing side by side with a general integration of science and technique in the life of men, exerts a perceptible influence in the sense of a normalization, on the language utilized in these translations.

The language employed in scholarly and technical works tends more and more to be codified. The avoidance of words with double meaning is recommended, as well as synonyms, paraphrases likely to lead to confusion, obscure words; one is advised to preferably use the same word in a given sense and an attempt is made to coordinate designations above and beyond frontiers. Terminology becomes a science ever encroaching. Usage which is suspected of anarchy, is submitted to a systematic rectification. Formerly usage was king: henceforth it is hoped that usage can be reformed.

Now, it is by way of translation that a great deal of the communication in this domain is effectuated. The translator finds

A General Theory of Translation

himself invested with new responsibilities vis-à-vis usage. Often it is up to him to launch new words. He will be reproached for the birth of certain barbarisms. And ultimately, he sets himself up as a censor and legislator of language.

The appearance of translating machines might aggravate this evolution. Up to now, works relating to "mechanical translation" have opened up new insights for us regarding the mechanisms of translation, the functioning of language and thought. The possibility that tomorrow the "T. M." might enter into a practical phase, performing those services proper to it, runs the risk of causing repercussions on the mode of expression to which scholars and technicians will be subjected. In order to facilitate the development of the machine, the language which will be presented to it will, in that case, have to submit to a preliminary dessication, a dessication which might gradually threaten vast zones of language from closer and closer. Up to now the laws of language commanded the rules of translation. Will the particularities of this kind of translation, under the form of specifications for an electronics machine, come to dominate linguistic usage?

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At present, the preceding constitutes only a speculation. Nevertheless, it seems legitimate for us to think about it and to consider so remarkable an eventuality in the course of any discussion bearing on laws of translation, their connection with language, and theories which might be legitimately derived from them.

Undoubtedly, it is not possible to simply classify mechanical translation from now on among existing "types" of translation. On the other hand, it would be poorly advised to exclude it *a priori*, with a shrug of the shoulders, because of irrational scorn or simple lack of information.

From now on, at any rate, shouldn't we take account of certain other kinds of translation, frequently very much under debate? For example, cinematographic dubbing.

This is one of the most widespread types of translation in the world today. There are more people on earth who go to see films than who read novels. Now, in most countries much cinematographic production is dubbed.

We have not dwelt particularly with theatrical translation which possesses old patents of nobility as a major *genre*. Film translation belongs here: there is the same attachment to the spoken and "speaking" expression, the same care for living dialogue and attention to the effect produced on a flesh and blood audience, the same integration within that combination of factors which constitutes the performance and which, in the case of the cinema, expands into the dimensions of an industry. If one prefers to reject stage translation, assigning it to the wretched confines of adaptation, it would be imprudent to forget it entirely in studies seeking to determine the theoretical bases of translation. In the past haven't many literatures made their first steps thanks to the help of foreign plays and haven't translations of this sort played a most important role?

To refuse purely and simply to take dubbing under consideration would be no less arbitrary. In disqualifying this type of translation in general the critic considers it sufficient to say that it is subject to the outside pressure of synchronism (and the cinema is equally criticized for failing sufficiently to respect synchronization. Synchronization consists of the obligation imposed on the dubber to follow the visible articulation of the original image and the "business" of the original actors. In other words, when he prepares his script he must remain faithful not only to the meaning which can be written on a sheet of paper, not only to the living form of the dialogue and its general tone as a performance, not only to cadence and syllable count (more strictly than this might concern the translator of poetic or religious text), not only must he know how to express himself in a spoken language, but he must also adapt himself to the physical elocution of these phrases in the original language. The vowels of the translated text must coincide with the vowels of the original and the closings of the mouth with the closings of the mouth. The key word must sometimes occupy the same place in the sentence, if a gesture, clearly visible on the screen, should come to punctuate it, no matter what might be the existing differences in the structure of both languages.

Wouldn't it therefore be legitimate to say, without trying to be paradoxical, that dubbing imposes the highest degree of faithfulness? The other types of translation were content to

A General Theory of Translation

reproduce fragmentary elements of the original; dubbing is bound to respect its totality. If anyone wants to set up hierarchies in terms of fidelity, doesn't dubbing have the right to occupy the topmost point of the pyramid and present itself as the only type of translation which is truly complete?

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There is another scale of necessary distinctions dependent upon the languages set into play by a translation operation—without, as far as that goes, being of a linguistic order.

We say that setting a page of an American novel into French is a task of translation. If the same operation be applied to a papyrus of thirty centuries ago from the Nile delta, the task would be confided to an Egyptologist and the operation would be called deciphering. To understand, for example, such and such a pygmy language we turn to ethnographers, explorers.

These instances might seem obvious and the distinctions artificial. Nevertheless, a fixed truth emerges from them: namely, that one does not translate with the same pen—that one does not read with the same eyes, that one does not respond with the same heart, that one does not speak with the same lips—those “message” coming from a neighboring, friendly, and familiar people and those coming from a foreign, distant, or hostile culture. The manner of translating the same authors might change over the course of a few years, without the grammatical and structural relationship between two languages having changed in the slightest; the new mode results simply from the fact that both cultures have come to know each other more intimately. To the degree that our knowledge increases and becomes more specific about the customs of a country and its dominant ways of acting, feeling, thinking and speaking, does it become possible to translate closer to the original. As long as there is ignorance, translation is inevitably explicative.

In the most extreme cases, the translator feels authorized to reproduce the foreign word just as it is. We write down “whiskey” and “porridge” without feeling any need to explain or even to “translate” into some other expression. Similarly for “soviet” and

"kolkkoz", for "fado" and "rock'n roll". But are we also justified in writing "drug store" just like that? Or even "espresso?"

Terms of measurement, titles, expressions of politeness, etc., frequently require conversions. Leaving unchanged "*stades*", "*miles*," "*verstes*," "*lis*," "*modeste maison*" and "*l'honorable partie de campagne*" is evidence of exoticism. But if the rendering of a foreign expression becomes obsolete in its turn, then the translation becomes ridiculous. Amyot has been unmercifully snickered at because he peopled ancient Greece with syndics and bailiffs. Isn't this simply because such terms have fallen into disuse in French? Gaspard de Tende made Cicero say "Monsieur, votre fils" (translation of *Servius noster*). Let us wait a hundred years before judging the translations of our time which pride themselves so on being rigorously faithful. Already Mardrus' version of the *Thousand and One Nights* emanates a flavor of Parisian life of the "Belle Epoch". And the successive versions of Homer—whether by Leconte de Lisle or Bérard—will eventually wind up alongside those by Mme Dacier and Houdar de la Motte.

The very meanings of the terms "fidelity" and "freedom" are changing. Gaspard de Tende, whom we have just quoted, asserted that there existed in the art of translation "as well as in all the other arts, fixed and certain rules" established according to "an immutable external order". Such an affirmation of principle would seem erroneous today. Quite on the contrary, today it is through translations that we try to discern the changing tastes and norms accepted by diverse epochs. (Cf. Reuben A. Brower, *Seven Agamemnons* in *On Translation*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1959).

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Ways of translating, and the demands confronting it reflect the value judgments accepted by different cultures, and locating them vis-à-vis each other. In the last analysis, the task of translation is constantly confronted with norms of an ethical nature.

The myth of Babel showed the earth possessing a single language. God inflicted linguistic diversity upon mankind to punish him. During the Middle Ages Latin appeared as the

A General Theory of Translation

common language of Christianity (that is to say, of humanity, in Christian eyes) of which the so-called vulgar languages were only accidental and passing corruptions.

Such being the case, was it wise, was it moral to cultivate these idioms? Could one presume to raise them to the level of Latin? Wasn't this playing the devil's game?

Before Latin, certainly there had been Greek. Scholars were not unaware of this, but yet they felt a real sense of uneasiness about it. *Graecum est, non legitur*. The first complete version of the Bible, translated into French (by Lefèvre d'Étaples) with reference to the Greek, was condemned by the Sorbonne.

Things went much further when access to sources of knowledge could only be arrived at via a detour of translations due to infidels. Roger Bacon took malicious pleasure in affirming that one would not be able to understand philosophy and the Holy Scriptures if one could not understand Arabic. Pope Sylvester II (elected in 999) went to study at the Moslem university at Cordova: of course, he didn't fail to be accused of commerce with the devil.

The Renaissance saw the cracking of this obdurate carapace. The "vulgar" languages received the right of citizenship. Let us not ask here up to what point this recognition was sincere. The old myth of a unique universal language is undoubtedly about to die. It is the evocation of an age of gold, manifesting itself again in Esperantist predictions grafted onto a messianism of universal peace.

Let us simply state that this reversal made the Renaissance one of the greatest periods of translation. A great period not only because of the number of books translated but also because of the sharpness of the conflicts raised by translation (wasn't the Reformation, in the first place, a translators' quarrel?) and because of the theoretical impulse then manifesting itself. In France, theories of translation go back to Etienne Dolet, author of a remarkable *Traité de la manière de bien traduire d'une langue en autre* and burned as a heretic in the Place Maubert in 1546 because of a supposed mistranslation committed in a Platonic dialogue.

However, only in the twentieth century have we become aware of a basic truth: namely, that the number of languages

worthy of being called such, are not limited to four or five, but that dozens and hundreds of them exist on earth; that Chinese has at least as much right as French or Latin to consider itself a universal language; that Biblical texts have been translated into more than a thousand idioms, some of which are spoken by millions of individuals.

These facts are beginning to be not only known but, willingly or unwillingly, admitted. The activity of translation is no longer the perquisite of rare initiates, of those mandarins of the republic of letters whom Valery Larbaud still had in mind (*Sous l'invocation de saint Jérôme*). The most cultivated people are no longer surprised to encounter it along their path.

International life has legalized the notion of linguistic diversity: organizations and conferences have their "official" languages, and their "work" languages. In fact, from now on, all human activities are penetrated by translation: literature, commerce, arts, sports, industry, religion... What might have formerly appeared to be an impious monstrosity becomes current coin and healthy practice in the eyes of most people. It has become a cliché to say that we live in "the age of translation."

This vertiginous expansion of translation activity (in ten years, between 1950 and 1960, the number of titles translated, reviewed by the *Index translationum* grew from less than 14,000 to more than 30,000) is due to two principal factors: multiplication of languages involved in exchanges, diversification of the types practiced.

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The preceding observations seems to us of capital importance.

In fact, in our opinion, what most seriously paralyzes attempts at setting up a theory of translation is the failure to recognize this double factor of complexity.

The elaboration of a general theory of translation involves the most complete possible census of the various types of translation practiced in our time.⁴ This census must be undertaken

⁴ This is what we have tried to sketch out in *La traduction dans le monde moderne* (Geneva, Georg, 1956).

A General Theory of Translation

without any exclusive *a priori* and must rest on the study of the evolution undergone by various types of translation, no longer taken in isolation and set up as an absolute, but oriented with respect to other types and in connection with them.⁵ Now, too often, students have delighted in studies of style which take account, for example, only of literary translation, ignoring all the other types. We are told that this is the only "true" translation, or the only one which counts, or the only one possible: afterwards it is child's play to set up sweeping definitions and announce dazzling laws. Undoubtedly, it is more difficult to accept the contradictory specific problems of poetic translation and technical translation, of automatic translation and literary translation, of interpreting and dubbing, and to risk talking about "translation in general" only by keeping all these various categories in mind. Only then can one try to build higher. Only a theory which has the courage to rest on all the columns, very disparate at first view, which have been set up in our century, will be able to plume itself on being a general theory of translation.

Similarly, it seems sterile to us to enclose the most beautiful arguments within the framework of relationships between French and English, or between Russian and German. In the Age of Reason, the Abbé Gédéon could declare: "translating means setting an ancient author, whether Greek or Latin, into a vulgar tongue." In his time, such an affirmation was not illegitimate. In our day, to lock oneself up into a "domain," rich though it be, and not to want to know about any others is already to condemn oneself to partial work. Those specialized fields have already been very thoroughly examined. Undoubtedly, they can never be examined too much. But can one pretend, in our time, to treat of poetic translation in general, without taking Chinese or Arabic poets into account? Is it conceivable to analyse the principles of technical and scientific translation without showing any interest in what is going on, let us say, in India or other new countries, where translation is very active in this realm and

⁵ This is what is new in works such as those by Oettinger (*Automatic Language Translation*) and especially by R. W. Jumpelt (*Die Uebersetzung naturwissenschaftlicher und technischer Literatur*) already mentioned, and *Problèmes théoriques de traduction* (to be published by N.R.F., Paris) by G. Mounin.

where it is complicated by the absence, in these new national languages, of the mass of terms necessarily utilized by scientific and technical vocabularies?⁶

Theoretical thinking must abjure all schematization, all arbitrary simplification concerning translation. Under pain of disqualifying itself it must cease to be partial and limited. No matter how useful and legitimate specialized and different fields of research remain, it is only on condition of accepting on good faith translation in its entirety and in its variety, in its complexity and in its variations as its subject of study, that it will be possible to set up a *general* theory, corresponding to the vertiginous development which animates the practical activities of translation in our time.

⁶ Data regarding this is certainly offered by E. Nida's work (*Toward a Science of Translating*) which systematically takes account of the experience acquired by Biblical translation into innumerable idioms.