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ABSTRACT

Translation, viewed as a process of linguistic summation, is considered on the levels of morphology, syntax, phonology, and vocabulary. Random variables which bear on loss/gain ratios are examined in formulae illustrating the relationship of subjectivity and objectivity in the translation process. Implications of theory are illustrated through selected examples of Latin literature. (RL)

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In translation?

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The growing frequency of courses involving the classics in translation only, provokes some questions. We wonder how much is lost in translation and what degree of distortion occurs. If we reassure ourselves on these points we discover the equally disturbing issue, whether the study of the original languages is still necessary at all, especially when the effort and time consumed in acquiring them may, for some, far exceed the value ultimately derived. Before the classics teacher sets out upon an instinctive defence of his discipline, the relative status of the original and its translations[1] requires objective appraisal.

For an estimate of translation distortion we may abstract from any language material various levels[2] of analysis. It will be convenient here to consider those of form, sound and meaning – or, in more conventional terminology, the levels of morphology and syntax, of phonology, and of vocabulary. Each of these three levels exhibits its own typical internal arrangement of categories and other sub-divisions. By experience, the analysis both of these levels and of their internal organization is in detail different for any separate language, although there may well be general characteristics that coincide between several languages. Any

[1]Throughout this article, 'translation' means the attempt to represent the original fully in another language. It does not refer to translationese versions whose only use is perhaps as an aid in construing the original.

[2]The *ad hoc* theory proposed here is conceived for the purpose of this general discussion only, and is not an attempt to formulate a full theory of translation, for which v. J. C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, London, 1965. Terminology is kept imprecise, and is not to be interpreted in the strict sense of any recent linguistic theory.

statement made in one language (L^1) involves all three levels simultaneously, and is a complex of all three. A translated statement in another language (L^2) is again a complex of all three levels, but in L^2 both the levels and their internal organization will now differ in detail. The L^2 statement can therefore only reproduce what we shall call a 'sum' of the L^1 statement, a version of the intended information, and in no case its original linguistic detail.[3]

Four conclusions may be drawn:

i that translation involves a loss, i.e. of the linguistic detail of all three levels of the L^1 statement, and that the exact distribution of this detail is irreplaceable;

ii that translation involves a gain, i.e. of the detail of all three levels of the L^2 translation, the items and distribution of which will have only a partial or even minimal correspondence with those of the L^1 statement;

iii that translation occurs via a stage of summation which is itself complex, and involves a selection between, and equation of, numerous alternative sums. This summation has at least three aspects: there is the summation of the L^1 statement; the summation of proposed L^2 translations; and the selection of the most suitable sums from either side to secure maximum equivalence;[4]

iv that translation is performed by an agent, the translator, who controls and edits the summation process. This translator may be a machine, in which case the instructions programmed

[3]'Statement' includes anything from a complete literary work down to the paragraph and sentence, or even sometimes clause – but not so much the phrase and the word, except of course where these happen themselves to constitute a complete sentence. More usually, the word and the phrase are an abstract of the analysis of many statements and their contexts. The lexicon which translates words of L^1 by words and phrases of L^2 is a convenient reference source, but is at a considerable distance from statements in L^1 or L^2. We know from experience that the word-for-word translation does not work. Theoretically, too, it is difficult to equate *dependent* parts of statements between any L^1 and L^2, where, on general grounds, no simple correspondence is to be expected.

[4]This account of a sum of a statement only touches upon the well-known problem, both linguistic and philosophical, of the meaning of a sentence. In translation there is the additional difficulty, probably equally severe, of finding criteria to define equivalence.

will need further more elaborate theory to secure adequate results. Or the translator may be human, in which case he will probably have no conscious awareness of the above theoretical analysis, but will proceed intuitively and subjectively on the basis of his acquaintance with both languages.

This analysis may be formulated as the equation:

$$\overset{L^1}{abc} = \overset{T}{s} = \overset{L^2}{xyz}$$

where a, b, c and x, y, z represent roughly comparable levels of L^1 and L^2, and where the summation, s, is controlled by the translator, T.

Complete or perfect translation, i.e. in which the L^2 material is in every respect of identical effect in any identical controlled L^2 context, is clearly not feasible. The random variables of context and situation are infinite, there are no criteria for determining identity of context and effect, while the T process can become almost unmanageably complex and the final selection highly subjective. In practice, therefore, translation must involve compromise, and the loss/gain may or may not be significant with regard to the intended information of the original.

The extent of this loss/gain, which therefore operates upon some scale of degree, will depend upon two related variables: first, how integral a part of the intended L^1 sum were the linguistic details, and, in inverse proportion, how objective the T process can be. To take the two extremes: where the details of the L^1 levels are least integral to the statement, s is relatively simple, and T has maximum objectivity. This is probably a statement in a register[5] of non-emotive information, unambiguous to most recipients, and other linguistic details could easily be substituted in L^1 to achieve the intended sum. The L^1 translation can then have maximum equivalence, and the loss/gain is minimal or negligible. Conversely the more the intended L^1 sum is directly dependent upon the exact linguistic details for its effect, the more

[5]A register is language as used in some specialized area of discourse, e.g. cricket commentary or legal language, and portrays its own peculiar limitations of form and vocabulary.

complex and multiple *s* becomes, the more subjective T becomes – then the resultant L^2 translation is at best partial and the loss/gain considerable.

One example of each extreme will suffice:

a) L^1 language details unimportant, i.e. alternatives available.

L^1	L^2
Smoking Forbidden	défense de fumer
	vietato fumare
	rauchen verboten

Numerous variants of these are encountered, e.g. *smoking prohibited, no smoking*, etc. The intended prohibition is unaffected by alternative linguistic expression.

b) L^1 linguistic details of maximum importance, i.e. no alternatives permissible.

L^1

ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram
perque domos Ditis vacuas et inania regna.

VIRGIL *Aeneid* VI 268-69.

L^2

They were walking in the darkness, with the shadows round them and night's loneliness above them, through Pluto's substanceless empire, and past its homes where there is no life within.

(Jackson Knight)

The first extreme is usually to be found in registers such as those of public information, technical data, and scientific terminology. Here a high proportion of the material, though not all, finds ready equivalents in other languages which normally use such information themselves. Although the linguistic details are, in the sense of this discussion, unimportant, yet in fact repetitive pattern and the demand for accuracy tend to limit the formal structure and especially the vocabulary of such registers, and the numerous linguistic variants available are not often employed. Registers such as these therefore lend themselves to

translation, once equivalents have been agreed, and such a process has a good prospect of automation.

The second extreme is concerned rather with stylistic literature, or otherwise memorable language – and, in our own case, with the classics of Greek and Latin. Here, the value of the work lies not only in *what* is said, the *s*, but also in the characteristic use of language – *how* it is said. The more the author exploits the possibilities of his language, and perhaps develops his own version of it, a style, the greater the loss when the details of these levels are changed in translation.

* * *

So much for theory. A thorough application of this to the translation of the classics is beyond the scope of this discussion. We may, however, select some examples and examine some of the implications. Of the four conclusions above, we look first at the loss/gain of linguistic detail.

For the formal level, we may start from the opening lines of Horace's *Odes* I, 5 – a poem to test the ingenuity of any translator, and one which has attracted a large number of translations.

> quis multa gracilis te puer in rosa
> perfusus liquidis urget odoribus
> grato, Pyrrha, sub antro?
> cui flavam religas comam,
> simplex munditiis?

These are of course contrived word patterns. To say that the Latin is strained is perhaps to go too far. Certainly, however, Horace is making maximum use of the flexibility of Latin word order. Latin enjoys this flexibility largely because its words carry their own syntax markers in their terminations.[6] In the structure of its formal level, the language is therefore opposed to one such as modern English, where words tend to be invariable and linear

[6]The word order is not, even so, entirely free. In the Horace example, machine scrambling of the words would not produce many intelligible sequences. The sentence consists of groupings, and is not any random arrangement of individual words.

order is the most important marker of syntax. Inevitably no English translation can mingle its order in this way, without threatening intelligibility. Also, intelligibility apart, positional variation of this type is rare in English and common in Latin. To attempt such variation in a translation is therefore immediately to lose the L^1 patterns for a gain of strange structure in L^2.

Latin terminations are also by nature fusional, combining in one ending several different grammatical functions, e.g. in *odoribus*, the categories of Noun, Plural, and Dative or Ablative case. With these endings to indicate the exact syntax, Latin is free to juxtapose words and achieve its familiar spatial compression and antithesis, as, for instance, in *perfusus liquidis* and *simplex munditiis*. There is both loss and gain when the English translation has to resort to numerous prepositions and other repetitive devices to keep the syntax clear, since the juxtapositions can rarely be achieved so starkly without some very odd English groupings.[7]

Further, in general, the layout of the Latin sentence differs markedly from that of the English sentence. The predilection for a periodic structure, for instance, is not wholly due to rhetorical and similar influences, but is at least partly favoured by the unequivocal marking of syntax which enables the sentence to anticipate and pick up clauses with an unforced ease and elegance. Whereas English is fond of a loose construction where several adjectives and adverbs may, for instance, often depend upon a single noun or verb, Latin may here show a different distribution of the phrases and find some way of knitting the syntax more closely together. Virgil, therefore, in the lines from Book VI of the *Aeneid* which were quoted earlier, seems to be constructing a relatively unusual Latin clause when he strings nearly two lines of adverbial phrase on to the verb *ibant*. If this is so, the English reader may need a conscious effort of recognition since such a structure is much commoner in English. Patterns of structure

[7]These, and any other similar comments upon the differences between separate languages, do not imply that one language is therefore the *better* vehicle of expression, in some peculiar absolute sense. Quality of expression depends much more upon the user. Each language is made capable of what it is asked to do.

with relative frequency such as these are almost certain to be misrepresented in translation.

As important to literature as its form, is its sound. And if formal patterns sometimes have at least distorted and inverted parallels, the chance is that the sound of the original is gone for ever. Apart from the general consideration that we have only an incomplete knowledge of Latin sound, especially at the level of intonation and rhythm of speech, even the music of the original that we can enjoy perishes in translation. To be sure, some more obvious stylized noises, such as whispering, galloping, roaring and the like, can be represented in equally stylized fashion, but what substitute can be made for lines such as the following, where the sound is perhaps more important than the syntax and informational content of the words?

> hinc via Tartarei quae fert Acherontis ad undas.
> turbidus hic caeno vastaque voragine gurges
> aestuat atque omnem Cocyto eructat harenam.
>
> VIRGIL *Aeneid* VI 295-97.

The sound of the language itself, other levels apart, is in the hands of a skilled speaker a powerful instrument for the influence of an audience. Such an effect must be largely the reason for the success of some of Cicero's weaker cases!

Form and sound raise the question of metre in verse and, equally important, rhythm in prose. Any attempt to translate with the same or somehow comparable metre produces something quite different and there is once more a loss and a gain in the translation. Whatever the true divergence between Latin and Greek quantitative verse and English stress verse, English verse is in any case written with different phonological syllables and the resultant pattern and rhythm are bound to differ.

At the level of meaning and vocabulary the problem is again severe. The difficulty is not simply, as often observed, that of equating words whose cultural context is strange, although obviously this is an important part of the problem. The issue is also that the whole semantic field is variously segmented by each separate language, giving terms which are not only troublesome

to equate from language to language on any simple basis, but which also have a different associative distribution and frequency pattern within their own language.

We might take as example the much discussed '*pius Aeneas*'. The problem is not only to select 'pious, religious, moral, conscientious, sincere, orthodox', or one of many other suggestions. The Latin is at once all of them and none of them. We need to know not only the area of meaning covered by the term, but also the other associated terms in Latin with which it correlates, and their relative frequency pattern. How does *pius* correlate with *bonus*, *nobilis*, *purus*, *gravis*, *prudens*, *sapiens* and a host of others ? Is *pius* relatively common or uncommon? The whole distributional pattern has to be studied. In other words, the translator requires a wide and deep acquaintance with all relevant literature, and with the religious, political and cultural background – in fact with all the contextual evidence for the word.[8]

The same would be true, on a less exalted scale, of *mensa* or *ianua*. Neither the division of the semantic field nor the distribution and frequency within the language is likely to coincide between independent languages. Translation therefore involves the loss of the L^1 patterns and the gain of L^2 patterns.

It is often said by teachers of Latin prose, that Latin prefers a more 'concrete' form of expression, English a more 'abstract'. Accordingly we are to expect *viri aliquid faciunt* rather than *potentia imperium facit*. To the extent that the observation may be true, this can only mean that, in Latin, distributional patterns favour words of a certain form, associated with a more literal meaning, as grammatical subject to *facere*, and that conversely nouns of certain formations with abstract association tend to occur more frequently in oblique cases. This is not to say of course that the *thought* of a sentence is any more concise or concrete. The feature is of form, with some semantic criteria. It could mean, by contrast, however, that typical Latin 'concrete'

[8]i.e. the meaning of a word is inherent mainly in how it is used, not in its etymology. Classical commentaries have had a notable tendency to explain by etymology, and distortion is often the result.

expressions should regularly be translated by typical English 'abstract' expressions.

The problem of meaning brings us to summation and the task of the translator. The summation of a statement involves all the linguistic detail of the three levels we have just described, and a decision as to what the author intended. The answer will rarely be simple or singular, and most usually the translator will be left with misgivings about his final selection. The question of emphasis and centre of interest is of paramount importance here. For example, in *ibant obscuri* . . ., where does the focus lie? In *ibant*, in *obscuri*, somewhere in the list that follows, or fairly evenly distributed throughout the lines? The marking of emphasis in Latin is probably not fully known, although we all know some working generalizations that have rubbed off on us. Almost certainly, however, the English and Latin systems do not agree. Inevitably the translator has to choose a sum for the emphasis of the original, and select another for his proposed translation.

In summation, the translator has to determine what features of the original are redundant with regard to the intended effect, and, particularly with the fusional forms of Latin and Greek, what structural categories may be omitted. The good translation is not usually the one that tries to express every detail of the original, but rather the translation that differentiates between what is essential and what is superfluous. For instance, the Greek maxim very often employs an Aorist Tense, the so-called Gnomic. Grammarians from antiquity onward have recognized that the temporal aspect is unimportant here. The English present is no more relevant than the Greek past. The structure of Greek forces a decision on time to be expressed, but the time aspect is in fact not significant.

Another complex feature of summation, which we might just mention, is ambiguity. A certain degree of ambiguity is often intentional in a literary work, for reasons of subtlety and artistry. In another sense, a degree of linguistic ambiguity is present in most statements. The translator has to make his own sum of both types.

From this suggestion of a theory and a few of its applications, we see a translation as at least twice removed from the original, linked to it only by a highly arbitrary process of summation, and in substance only. Since it is the result of an act of interpretation by a translator, it is essentially second-hand. The loss of the original linguistic detail and the gain of translated detail leads to considerable distortion. Among other implications, this means that the translation cannot be studied for an intimate knowledge of the original, since study involves detail, and it is precisely the detail which disappears, and is, for the non-linguist at least, beyond verification. In other words, a translation is a completely new creation, a new experience for a new audience in a new cultural context. As this, the brilliant translation may be very successful in giving an experience of the classics to the non-classicist. This is perfectly valid and in many ways admirable, but this is not an experience of the original. Such a successful experience may, however, be preferable to the painful and fragmentary acquaintance that some school pupils at present derive from their study of the original.

This article has not been a polemic against translations, nor, for that matter, an apologetic for the original – but merely an attempt to analyse some of the distortion of any literary translation. Reading the original is still the only means of studying it. Great writing consists in its detail, and this, as we have seen, perishes in translation. But to read the original the student needs a fluent reading ability, and it is to this end that any review of current teaching needs to be directed.

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