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## THE TRANSLATOR AS WRITER

### 1 The quality of writing in translation

Good writing, which encompasses the aesthetic truth of a translation, is an essential component of a comprehensive translation theory, if only because it indicates the one creative way to compensate for the many lexical gaps and deficiencies which exist in all languages.\*\* Thus many languages cannot distinguish ‘policy’ from ‘politics’ and lack the emphatic present tense (he does understand). If these gaps and deficiencies were not eliminated, then corresponding deficiencies in the process of thinking and in the state of thought would result. To my knowledge, the importance of good writing has not been incorporated into any ‘mainstream’ translation theory except into the Chinese, notably by the well known and often quoted translator Yan-fu (1854–1921), who, in his essay “A translator’s preface to translation”, posited fidelity, communicativeness and elegance as the essential qualities of a translation; his concept of elegance, which was to some extent a reaction against literal translation, provided both for clarity and restrained repetition within a text.

In contrast, Vladimir Nabokov, whose numerous writings in favour of literal translation are a cornerstone of translation theory – see in particular “The Problems of Translation: *Onegin* in English” (2004) – has promoted a concept of translation which violates the aesthetic truth.

I see aesthetic truth as encompassing elegance, clarity, brevity and simplicity in non-literary texts, whether they are factual or reflective; and beauty and feeling in literary texts.

The aesthetic truth is one of the five universal bases of translation – the others are, in my view, the factual, that is, the correspondence of the facts in the text with reality; the logical, that is, the right temporal, causal and contrastive sequence of events in the translation (for example, after: then, therefore, however, but, etc. when they introduce a clause); the ethical, calling for the translator’s extratextual comment on falsehoods, inaccuracies, prejudiced language, since the reader should never be misled by a translation; and the linguistic truth, where languages comple-

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ment each other to express potentially universal thinking. (An example is the German phrase *Ich wünsche Ihnen eine glückliche Hand*, which could be translated as: As the Germans say, “I wish you a lucky hand”, meaning flair, intuition, luck etc.)

In fact Nabokov has a sensitive aesthetic feeling for poetic writing – remember the euphonious but artificial; finally bogus, opening of *Lolita* – “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins, my sun, my soul” – but in his discussion of translation, he excludes any possibility of melding aesthetic correspondence with semantic equivalence; the latter two, however you formulate them, are, I think, the essence of a good translation. Nabokov’s notorious “pyramids of notes” are no compensation for Walter Benjamin’s complementary approach, which Benjamin referred to as “pure” language (*reine Sprache*); further, it excludes elegance, which is etymologically based on the concept of delicate concision and choice.

Factually a translation can be entirely accurate, but linguistically and culturally, as well as imaginatively and intellectually, it can only be approximately accurate. The substance of language has so many aspects, each of which impact on meaning, and therefore require a different prioritization for each genre of text, that the translator cannot fully do justice to all of these aspects, whether they are the idioms in a non-literary or the alliterations in a literary text.

## 2 Four kinds of good writing

There is a common myth that only a literary translator needs to write well, whilst a non-literary translator merely has to reproduce the facts clearly, and has no business with “fancy” writing. Such myths, like many others, originate from the “two cultures” tradition (the alienation of scientists and humanists) or, alternatively, the divide between the “real world” (hands on) and the “ivory tower” (academe, sometimes called the academy), or again, the masculinity of work, and the femininity of the muses, which are both equally anachronistic. In fact, good writing is important in every translation, and all translations should be as clear, accurate and succinct as is possible, however remotely they may finally be driven away from these goals by an authoritative original.

Four kinds of writing well are often confused:

1. Writing in accordance with the rules of grammar, with every word used in its “correct” sense. This is a lengthy tradition, more French than English (*elle connait sa langue*) ending up with the silly: “never end a sentence with a preposition”, “never split an infinitive” and “only use a word in its true (that is, original) etymological sense”, all of which are plain nonsense.

2. Writing in the right register, which is the obsession of the discourse analyst and the corpus linguist. Accordingly – I am expanding Michael Halliday’s systemic-functional approach – the writer or translator must respect the register of

- (a) the mode or medium of the communication, which may be: a written text, a spoken message, surtitles, sub-titling, e-mail, faxing, telegrams (some still exist), greetings cards etc.;

(b) the tenor or style or degree of formality of the communication, categorised, say, as *officialese/official/formal/neutral/informal/colloquial/slang/taboo* (my version in *A Textbook of Translation*. Martin Joos, in *The Five Clocks* (1964), and Peter Strevens produced variations on these scales);

(c) the field or province or domain or topic or subject-area of the communication, such as music or geography.

Frequency of occurrence is the main criterion in determining these registers in the area of syntax, phraseology and lexis.

3. Personal or idiolectal writing, a combination of self-expression, imagination and observation, drawing on one individual's personality and experience, which does not "evolve in a vacuum," but, since it arises from thinking or dreaming rather than talking, is not a "social process."

4. "Cultural" writing, a hazy concept. The implication is that English understatement (ironical or not), Italian hyperbole, Arabic sycophancy, French clarity, German ponderousness/lack of humour, all fostered by an academic tradition, are each peculiar to their languages, and are to be emulated. Whatever truth there may be or may have been in this concept may well disappear.

Essentially, writing well flows from (3), personal or idiolectal writing, which is creative, fresh, and lively, but (2), the particular register should be respected, but not to the point of absurdity; it may lead to endless repetitions of clichéd buzz words, think: deliver, parameter, template, agenda, problem, strategy, crucial, space, major, classic, cutting edge, look at. Correct grammar and good writing are also frequently confused – a translation scholar who is "internationally respected" – such sobriquets come rather cheap to translation theorists! – or "international" (politically correct word for "foreign" – joke) once told me he would never write English as well as I do, referring mistakenly to his non-native use of English – little did he know that I'm from Brno (joke) – and unaware that, inevitably, he wrote his native Hebrew just as conventionally and boringly as he wrote English.

### 3 Good writing

Positively, good writing can be described as normally "proper words in proper places" (Swift), the tight "dress of thought" (Pope, almost), balanced, serene, succinct, plain, spare, sparing of intensives and descriptive adjectives), clean, contemporary (*il faut être moderne* – Rimbaud), neat, elegant, light, sauber/sober, natural, that is, alive with the speech-rhythms within its written form, and all this, even when it is expressing extremes of emotion. It includes the distinction between on the one hand, the orderly, rule-bound, and on the other, the expressive uses of punctuation, which have been popularized and enlivened in recent years by Lynn Truss's *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* and the hilariously funny and witty Larry (R. L.) Trask's *Penguin Guide to Punctuation*. Any style book on decent writing, such as the *Economist's* or the *Guardian's*, must now consider the "correct" use of acronyms, such as A. I. (is it "artificial intelligence" or "arti-

ficial insemination” or “Amnesty International” – the context must clarify) or the UN, not to mention JAMU, *Janáčková akademie muzických umění* (the Janacek Academy of the musical arts), which have lately become an important and much abused feature of most languages. Acronyms must be written out at first mention, and only invented when they are referring to objects or institutions of value and of some permanence, e.g. NGO’s, not, as so often, merely an advertisement for a self-important commercial enterprise; technical acronyms in translations written for general or differently specialised readers are absurd.

I think the “modern” exemplars for literary writing could be Evelyn Waugh (1903–1966) and for non-literary writing the American Keynesian economist J. K. Galbraith (b. 1908), both 20th century writers, both remarkably similar and alive in style, both with the same inclination towards a classical symmetry, an alternation of tension and relaxation of language. Here are two brief extracts:

It was “Pont Street” to wear a signet ring and to give chocolates at the theatre; it was “Pont Street” at a dance to say, “Can I forage for you?” Whatever Rex might be, he was definitely not “Pont Street.” He had stepped straight from the underworld into the world of Brenda Champion who was herself the innermost of a number of concentric ivory spheres. (*Brideshead revisited*, 32)

In later consequence, the solvency of numerous banks, including that of the nation’s largest and most prestigious institutions, was either fatally impaired or placed in doubt. The lending of both those that failed or were endangered, and others, was subject, by fear and example, to curtailment. (*The Culture of Contentment*, 60)

[Note also, as an exemplar of “the third way” literary – non-literary writing, Kenneth Clark’s outstanding *The Nude* (1956), which has a similar classical balance: “The English language, with its elaborate generosity, distinguishes between the naked and the nude” (1). Alas, you can’t say that in Czech or French or German, though you have *akt* for a nude in art in Czech and German.]

In principle, literary texts, that is, poetry, short stories, novels and plays, which are centred in the mind and the imagination, are allegorical, metaphorical and connotative; non-literary texts, which are centred in reality and reporting, are literal, objective and denotative.

#### 4 The strengths of English

Good writing of English, which could be considered to be the global target *lingua franca* of translation, exploits:

(a) its basic monosyllabism (contrasting with Romance and Germanic bisyllabism, and Slavic trisyllabism);

(b) its mainly monosyllabic phrasal words (verbs, e.g. “to put up”; nouns e.g. “a put down”; adjectives, which are rare and less productive, e.g. “run down”). These are the glory of the English language; but they are sometimes dangerously ambiguous for translators, as they are mostly polysemantic (or do you prefer “polysemous”?), having at least one physical and one figurative meaning. Perhaps fifty years ago they would in most instances have been regarded as slang and, like grecolatinisms in German, been excluded from the standard written language. You may know that “put up with” was notoriously erased by a civil servant from a draft speech of Winston Churchill’s and that Churchill replied: “This is a nonsense with which I will not upput”;

(c) its exceptional flexibility in the conversion of monosyllabic word-classes, alternating the emphasis between nouns, verbs and adjectives (I do the *shopping*, I *shop*, a *shopping* tour) extending to adverbs and prepositions (a round, to round off, a round trip, to look round, round the shop);

(d) in a range of imaginative literature, funny, comic, and sometimes serious, its exceptionally powerful capacity for creating usually monosyllabic puns (e.g. “fit” (adj.) and “fi” (n.) and wordplay (e.g. “fission”/“fusion”), producing a unique variety of humour, wit, fun, comedy, farce, burlesque, slapstick, jests, jokes;

(e) its Greco-Latin intellectual linguistic base, which eases its translation into many, and, in the future, all other languages, as technology and world communications spread;

(f) its unprecedentedly large vocabulary, its exceptionally varied grammatical resources, based on simple SVO sentences, and its exceptionally numerous sounds or phonemes, diphthongs and triphthongs in particular;

(g) its multi-noun compounds, which should be grammatically clear (as in “the Heimlich procedure”) or common and standardized, as in “share options” or “twilight sleep”, not grammatically ambiguous as in “corner shop mission statement”;

(h) its unique variety of nominalizations, including not only the “-ing” phrases (e.g. “walking the plank is dangerous”) and the gerunds (“walking is healthy”), but also the infinitive (e.g. “to err is human”) and all classes of subordinate clauses (e.g. “whether she comes or not, depends on you”, “that he has arrived is sure”), which may constitute the subject, object or possessive case of a sentence, replacing nouns or pronouns. Again, these nominalizations can sound stiff, as in the last example; they have to be deftly used;

(i) its mainly Greco-Latin powers of “affixal” (that is, “prefixal” and “suffixal”) derivation, shared with many other languages (e.g. para-, mini-, maxi- etc.; -ism, -istic, -istically, -ise, -ize, -ality, -ility, -ation, -isation, -ition), which have the advantage of concision and frequently the disadvantage of generalising and jargonising; for example, intentionality, the problematic(s), problematize, translatology; the last term, which has been adopted by Charles University, like many similar compounds, is not ill sounding, as some people mistakenly believe; nevertheless, I think it is intellectually pretentious, and, for a discipline which vitally concerns the Czech language, which, like most so-called minority languages, is

threatened, I think Prague should have coined a Czech term, which is surely not difficult. I know any PR or HR outfit would disagree with me.

With all that, however one may define or generalize good writing and good English, the essence of a well written translated text is inevitably its uniqueness, its quiddity, its difference from other styles of writing. Which is likely to be least perceptible yet still evident in the prose of a non-literary translation, and most perceptible in the poetry of a translated poem. Difficult as it is to propose an independent theory of good writing in translation, one may require it, even if it is only a facsimile of a theory of good writing in original composition, for purposes of translation training and translation evaluation. In spite of many constraints, since the translator has so many factors to take into account and assess, the translator of a poem has the greatest freedom and expresses her creative personality wherever she has to deviate from literal translation, which is more frequently than in any other genre; contrariwise, if the translator is going to respect the style of a non-literary text faithfully, she will find it easier to do so, and may have less freedom of choice, since there are fewer parameters; if the status of the text, however, is not so high, as in a news report, she will translate more freely and claim her individuality again.

### **5 A translator's qualities**

If I now refer briefly to the translator, I must first state that I have always observed a strong correlation between the skills of writing well and translating well among students, long before I suggested that good translating should be based on good writing.

I think that the writing skill can always be improved by practice, wide reading and guidance, though some students start learning too late, unless they are indefatigably motivated. Thus the “born translator” like the “he’ll never be a translator” is likely to be the fantasy of the authoritarian professor. Secondly the translator as writer has to be as curious of words as of facts. Thirdly, as a reader, she has to be as skilled in skimming as in “sonorising” (listening to herself mentally reading), to be aware of degrees of attention in reading a poem or a song, when often, after the first line, the rest of the text is merely heard uncomprehendingly rather than listened to attentively, and so many rather mediocre poems/sonnets are celebrated only for their first lines. Fourthly, the translator has to be free from any of the prejudices of the two cultures, which are epitomized in the superiority of action over thought, or vice versa.

Fifthly, she has to mentally visualise a scene, to dramatize a situation, to empathise sympathetically with an author and also to report, either eliminating or retaining values and emotions from a scene.

## 6 Rotten writing

An alternative form of definition is always by way of opposites. The vast proliferation of poor writing has not much to do with deficiencies of grammar, though these are conspicuous when they appear. It is certainly apparent in a lack of vocabulary. But it is most obvious in the “diseased” language, as Kenneth Hudson called it, that is described by the terms “padding”, writing more just to be paid more; gobbledegook, repetitious, wordy and generally unintelligible jargon, in the sense of technical language used to impress rather than to inform; truisms, which is stating what is too obvious to be mentioned; platitudes, which are self-evident, and clichés, which are trite, hackneyed, stereotypical and overused ways of stating the obvious; hocus-pocus, which is deceitful nonsense; mumbo jumbo, which is elaborate gibberish; or what I call “froth”, a common construction, consisting of an artificial hypothesis which is discussed at length, laced with pseudo-apologetic of course’s, naturally’s, crucially’s (to hot the sentence up), certainly’s, undoubtedly’s, definitely’s, for sure’s, to be sure’s, and finally blown away or knocked down like an Aunt Sally. (Examples passim, but try the piece on a generic view of applied linguistics by Martin Bygate in the current Volume 17 2004 of the *AILA* (International Association of Applied Linguistics) Review):

“This evolution can of course be seen as reflecting a generalisation of the parameters of the discipline.” How can you expect translators to write better, if so many linguists and translation “scholars” don’t know how to write?

All this has spread to eurofog, the international or English language disease that has infected the European Union, and that is being combated by a group of EU translators. Bureaucratese spreads its poison in the offices of the Anglophone civil services. The vast realm of advertising, the language of public relations, head hunters, and human resources (H. R., i.e. personnel) is pervaded with nonsense like:

“You will assume total responsibility for the export sales management control function...”. The sources of these pseudo-languages are usually sociological and /or psychological terms generalized for self-aggrandizing purposes.

## 6 Training the translator

I have tried to show that in principle, that is, allowing for exceptions and poor originals, a translator has to be trained and assessed for the quality of her writing as well as the accuracy of her versions, and that good writing reflects clear and fresh thinking to a much greater degree than correct application of the norms of grammar, spelling and register, important as the latter may be.

Further, I think that most translation courses should devote about 10% of their programmes to a syllabus on Good Writing, centred on the analysis of a dozen representative texts through various types of reading, contrast between written and spoken text, the functional perspective of sentences, modelled on Jan Firbas’s analyses, and the search for analogous works. There should be extended by

various exercises in analytical reading, paraphrasing, summarising, skimming, sonorising, as well as in note-taking which is essential unless you want to forget everything.

The success of many translations often finally depends on their “feel”, their peculiar quality. And this, above all, is a matter of good writing.

### Works Cited

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