

Research Note **【研究討論】**

On the Art of Translation  
**論翻譯的藝術**

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I would like to state at the outset that my main field is Chinese linguistics. My scholarly production is confined to the disciplines of Chinese dialectology, historical phonology, archaic and modern syntax, semantics and metrics. I have no formal training in the disciplines of literary theory and criticism, nor have I entered into a serious study of translatology. I have read a fair amount of Chinese literature, Ancient, Medieval, Modern and Contemporary. In the last fifty years I have engaged in translation and consider myself an amateur translator. (I refer you to the second definition of the term "amateur" in the Oxford English Dictionary: "One who cultivates anything as a pastime, as distinguished from one who prosecutes it professionally.")

What a translator has to work with are texts. The texts may be structured in a variety of ways. They may be cut up into segments of varying lengths which are linked together by no prosodic rules other than those which are inherent in the language itself. Other text segments may have been linked together by more or less strict rules which govern the length of the segments, the placing of stressed and unstressed syllables, caesuras and euphonic elements, such as rhyme and alliteration. The task of the translator is to transfer, as well as he or she can, the message of the original, even that part of the message which is carried by the form and the structure of the original.

The difference between two languages is sometimes so great that any attempt to transpose poetic forms from the one language into the other is doomed to fail. Some 40 years ago I experimented with a kind of a-syntactic translation of Classical Chinese poetry into Swedish. I simply transposed the words of the original into Swedish, with utter disregard for the morphological and syntactical demands of the Swedish language. Here is an example, transposed into a-syntactical English, of a short lyrical poem entitled *Jiangxue*, River snow, by the Tang poet Liu Zongyuan (773-819):

*Qian shan, niao fei jue,  
wan jing, ren zong mie.  
Gu zhou, suo li weng,  
du diao, han jiang xue.*

Thousand mountain, bird fly sever,  
ten thousand path, man footprint extinguish.  
Solitary boat, rain-cape, bamboo-hat old man,  
alone fish, cold river snow.

When you translate Classical Chinese poetry into a Western language, the target language forces you to specify what is not specified in the original. You have to decide for yourself whether the nouns have definite or indefinite reference and whether they should be given singular or plural form. Tense is not formally expressed in Classical Chinese. But the translator's Western language forces him or her to decide whether the action or state referred to pertains to the past, the present or the future. The universality and the timelessness which characterize the original Chinese poems are lost in the translation.

Chinese is a tonal language. The national language of modern China possesses four tones, which are either falling, or rising, or both falling and rising or neither falling nor rising, that is level. Much of the lyrical poetry which flourished in the Tang (618-906) and Song (960-1279) periods is tonal, requiring a strict antithetical arrangement of level and inflected tones within the verse and the stanza. These tonal features cannot of course be mirrored in translation into a non-tonal language. Again, the regular placing of the caesura in five- and seven-syllabic verse, which are the dominant metrical forms in Classical Chinese poetry, cannot possibly be carried over in translation. A fair approximation of the original metre has been achieved by the eminent English sinologist and translator Arthur Waley, who adopted the "sprung rhythm" characterizing the poetry of

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), a rather free iambic metre, with occasional added trochees and a free use of unstressed syllables. Waley's translations, in which each syllable of the original poem is matched by one stressed syllable in the translation, were praised by both T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. As one or more unstressed syllables normally occur between the stressed syllables the line becomes considerably longer in the translation.

In some cases the metrical form of a modern Chinese poem is so closely linked to its content that it is well-nigh impossible to achieve a translation that does justice to the original. Wen Yiduo (1899-1946), to my mind the greatest Chinese poet of the 1920s, asserted that the form of a poem must satisfy both the eye of the reader and the ear of the listener: the musical features of the language must serve as building bricks in a structure of architectonic beauty. The title poem of the collection *Sishui* (Deadwater) was by Wen Yiduo himself considered to be his most successful experiment in the field of metrical architecture. Each verse in the poem consists of nine syllables, which are grouped into three two-syllabic units and one three-syllabic unit. The three-syllabic unit changes position from verse to verse, but can never occur in verse-final position. This feature creates a rhythmical tension in the regular structure. The first verse in the poems reads as follows in the original:

*Zheshi yigou juewangde sishui*

"Here's a ditch of hopeless deadwater"

One English translation of this poem amounts to nothing less than cold-blooded murder of one of the finest poems in Modern Chinese literature:

"This is a ditch of hopelessly dead water"

The translation utterly destroys the rhythm of the original verse. It also treats the compound noun *sishui* ("deadwater") as a phrase ("dead water"). Finally the adjective *juewangde* has been converted into an adverb, "hopelessly". This one example goes a long way to demonstrate that a translator must have a firm grasp of the purely linguistic aspects of the text he is translating.

In the early 1950s, all dogs disappeared from the streets of China's cities. The shaggy airedale bitch that followed me to my office every day during three years stay in Peking in the mid 1950s, naturally created quite a stir: "Have you seen! A lion!", "A tiger!", "A lamb!", "A wolf!" cried the children in the street. The Chinese word for "dog" (*gou*), which can be traced back to the fourth century before our era, had suddenly become a nonsense-word in the language of the children, as an effect of the decision by the Chinese Health Authorities to exterminate all dogs in Chinese cities.

The units in the systems on which language builds (the phonological system, the grammatical system and the semantic relations) cannot be defined in positive terms, out from what they *are*, but only negatively, out from what they are *not*, in relation to other units in the systems. In consequence, a change in one single unit in a given system will influence the relations between all units involved in the system. When the dog disappears the lion becomes a shaggy beast.

If a dog can change into a lion, what may then happen to words with more abstract significance, such as "co-determination", "individuality" and "culture"? The term *zhishi qingnian* which prior to the cultural revolution referred to intellectual youths, has come to refer to youngsters with a certain school education who during the cultural revolution were sent down to the countryside to be re-educated.

Great misunderstandings may appear when words are carried from one cultural milieu to another. When Indian missionaries and Chinese converts to Buddhism in the third century of our era began to translate the subtle philosophy

of *Mahayana* Buddhism, they made free use of terms which had gained acceptance in the Confucian and Daoist schools of thought. *Dao* which stood for the cosmic order of the Confucianists and for the Absolute in Daoist thought had to make do for the complex Sanskrit term *Dharma*, "the Law", "the Teaching". The Confucian term *xiaoshun*, "filial obedience", translated the Sanskrit word *sila*, "moral conduct". And the Daoist term *wuwei*, denoting abstention from conscious striving, had to make do for Sanskrit *Nirvana*. While these translations possibly could entice some Confucians and Daoists to join the imported religion, they were at the same time instrumental in distorting the Buddhist credo.

The very strong politicization of the Chinese language in the past half century has resulted in a great many semantic shifts. When Chinese demonstrators in the 1980s demanded respect for Human Rights, the spokesman of their government assured them that Human Rights mainly ensure citizens the right not to starve. The re-definition of the term Human Rights cannot be regarded in isolation, its repercussions reach out to every single concept in the sphere of socio-political and moral relations.

One factor which to a high degree hampers the dialogue across language barriers and ideological borders is that representatives of our Western civilization always are ready to assume that our own labels for notions such as *individualism*, *democracy*, *justice* and *freedom* are universally valid. But both the traditional Confucian and the Marxist ideology in China require of the individual that he or she accept the authority of the collective group, be it the family, the work team, the Party of the State. It is therefore not surprising that the Chinese counterparts of words like *individualism* and *freedom* often carry negative connotations. Freedom may be defined as the right to act according to one's own choice, without regard for the interests of the collective group.

It is obvious that certain messages may be more readily translated into one particular language than into another. The dialectic system of Hegel, in which the

ambiguous word *aufheben* has an important function, can easily be translated into Swedish, since the Swedish verb *upphäva* possesses two of the three main meanings of the German verb *aufheben*, namely "to cancel out" and "to raise up". (In his dialectal system Hegel establishes a thesis which is *cancelled out* by its antithesis, whereupon the synthesis of this process is *raised up* as thesis on a higher level of truth). English translators of Hegel experienced difficulties with his *aufheben*, for which verb their language has no exact counterpart. And the Chinese translators who tackled the problem in the early 1920s in the end gave up and created the horrible translation loan *ao-fu-he-bian*!

Words are labels which we stick on things and phenomena around us and within us. Sometimes we find a fairly close concordance, in different languages, between the labels and the reality which they denote. But on the whole I tend to believe in Wittgenstein's thesis that language delimits our perception of the world around us. I firmly believe that the Swedish word *gul*, the English word *yellow*, the German word *gelb* and the Chinese word *huang* cover differing segments of the spectrum. Even the most skilled and conscientious translator will sometimes have to content himself or herself with translating labels, not the underlying reality.

Most problems of a purely linguistic nature can normally be solved by a translator who has a perfect command of his mother tongue and an excellent command of the language into which or from which he translates. But there are cases when even the most skilled translator is forced to throw in the towel. The medieval ontological proof *Deus bonus est, ergo Deus est* entirely builds on the linguistic fact that the Latin verb *esse*, like English *to be*, serves both as a copula, linking a subject to a predicate, and as an intransitive verb, meaning "to exist". Any attempt to translate this ontological proof into a language such as Russian or Chinese, which lack a verb with this double function, is bound to fail dismally. What was once seen as an eternal theological truth turns out to be nothing but a demonstration of a linguistic feature common to most Indo-European languages.

I firmly believe that a Japanese manual concerning the maintenance of a Mazda automobile may be efficiently translated into languages such as Swedish and Swahili. The question is whether this applies also to the translation of a literary text. This question is of course of great concern to those whose task it is to judge the literary quality of a work, the original text of which is not accessible to them. All members of the Swedish Academy are able to read works in at least three European languages (English, German and French); some members have a good command of other languages, such as Russian, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian. When judging literature written in languages other than these, members of the Academy have to rely on translations. I shall here try to give you some idea of the time and energy that are sometimes spent to ensure a fair adjudication of a literary *oeuvre* accessible only through translation. In 1960, the Japanese writer Yasunari Kawabata was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature by the Japanese PEN Club. In the following year the Academy requested Per Erik Wahlund, an eminent Swedish writer and literary critic, to submit a report on Kawabata's work. Wahlund, who was greatly interested in Japanese literature, though he lacked competence in the language, submitted a report, based on translations into English, German and French of some of Kawabata's novels, translated by Edward Seidensticker, Donald Keene, Professor in Japanese Language and Literature at Columbia University, and others. As the next step, the Academy sought the expert advice of two Japanologists, Howard S. Hibbett, Professor in Japanese Language and Literature at Cambridge University and Donald Keene. Having received positive reports from these two experts, the Academy approached a learned Japanese scholar, Sei Ito, who in his report commented on the literary qualities of both Kawabata's original works and the existing translations. Before Kawabata was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1968, members of the Academy had had ample opportunities to acquaint themselves with his works, through translations.

In his magnificent work *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (1975) George Steiner points out that translation, among other things, is a work



of self-denial, demanding that the translator serve the original, rather than imposing himself or herself on it. But he also points out that all translation, like all reading and even all listening, is a work of editing, a work of interpretation, determined by subjective and contextual factors. If the poet is a Maker and Creator, which indeed is the original meaning of the word, then the translator is ideally a highly skilled craftsman. And we know that in ancient times, in both Western and Eastern civilization, craftsmen were slaves. Self-denial is one of the cardinal virtues of slaves. But as the task of translation also involves editing and interpreting, the translator must also serve as actor. The translator must imitate the author of the original work, and his translation must be a likeness of the original work. The translator must never strive to excel the author, although the literary qualities of a translation occasionally and for various reasons may appear to be superior to those of the original work. A skilled translator who masters the language into which he translates (normally his mother tongue) is bound to use to his best advantage such prosodic, euphonic and musical effects as his language places at his disposal. In doing so, he may add to his translation features which are not present in the original work. Paradoxically, the more skilled the translator, and the more acutely his ear is tuned to prosodic and musical features, the farther his translation may deviate from the original text. A famous Swedish poet and man of letters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century once said: "Beautiful translations are like beautiful women, that is to say, they are not always the most faithful ones."

I just mentioned that the readability of a translation may appear to surpass that of the original text. In the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the learned Chinese scholar Lin Shu, who himself did not master any foreign language, translated some 130 works of Western literature into classical Chinese, with the aid of a competent assistant. His translation of Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* was instrumental in creating a great interest for the study of English literature. Dr Hu Shi, a prominent Chinese scholar and writer, has the following to say about Lin Shu's translations: "It was a tremendous task and exceedingly amusing to read the comic figures in the novels by Charles Dickens talking in the dead

language of two thousand years ago." The British sinologist, translator and poet Arthur Waley voices a diametrically opposite view: "Dickens inevitably becomes a rather different and to my mind a better writer. All the over elaborations, the overstatement and uncurbed garrulity disappear." The famous scholar-writer Qian Zhongshu, who achieved a complete mastery of the major European languages, somewhere states that he in his youth preferred to read Rider Haggard's novels in Lin Shu's translation.

My late friend Jaroslav Prusek (1906-1980), a great Czech scholar in the fields of Old Vernacular and Modern Chinese literature, once said to me: "You cannot discuss a work which you have not translated. I did not believe him then, but having spent my spare time during the last fifty years on translating Chinese literature I have come to realize that Prusek's statements is not altogether wide of the mark. No matter how carefully you read a literary work, it is only when you sit down to translate it that you really come to grips with it.

Each translator approaches his work in his or her own Way. To me, translation is a work of love. (I should add that my amateur status affords me the privilege of myself choosing what I want to translate.) But this love must be tempered by recognition of the translator's twofold responsibility, towards the author of the original text and his own readers. Before starting to translate, be it a long novel or a short poem, I read the work several times in rapid succession, in order to get the feeling for the structure and the flow of the text. While reading and re-reading the text I make mental notes of passages which I know will present a challenge, and ponder over how they might be best translated. I always articulate the text silently when I read, which gives me a sore throat at the end of a long day's work. The repeated readings make me feel the presence of the author, and the author's voice. When I eventually arrive at the point when my own voice, and breathing, are in harmony with the voice and the breathing of the author, then the work is almost done. I am aware of the fact that my notions of the author's voice and breathing may sound like hocus-pocus to you. I am at a

loss to explain how it works, but I do know that it does. Once I feel that I have reached this stage, I am ready to devise a language and a style to match those of the original text.

I once discussed this method of translation with a Swedish colleague, who happens to be an excellent translator. He objected that this method would deprive him of the pleasure of surprise and unexpected encounters: to him, turning pages in the book he translated was like following a meandering mountain path, not knowing what view might unfold itself beyond the next bend.

The repeated and articulated readings of a text have an added advantage in that they may make you discover features which otherwise may have been undetected, such as the occurrence of dialect. Phonological dialectal features are effectively hidden under the logographic Chinese script. But they may appear in the vocabulary and as features of both morphology and syntax. Such dialectal features as do appear must be mirrored in the translation. A translator who fails to account for such features is guilty of what has been called the deadly sin of normalizing and levelling.

Normalizing and levelling are at the very core of the problem of all literary translation. These terms refer to the trimming out and smoothing out the text, cutting off its edges and neutralizing its very effects. The author, the creator of the text, allows himself the freedom to deviate from norms, forging new words, distorting syntax and playing with the multiple senses of words and nuances. The translator, the craftsman, must do his utmost to convey such deviations in his translation. The worst case of levelling is cutting out segments of the text, and adding what is not present in the text.

Cultural levelling is equally reprehensible. Any source language expresses a particular world vision which may be quite different from that of the target language. The translator should be aware of the fact that the translation of a text at the same time is a translation of a culture. Such cultural elements as may seem

strange to the reader of the translation must be elucidated to him or her. I personally abhor footnotes, which tend to obstruct the flow of the text. I much prefer to deal with such elements in an introduction or a foreword to the translation.

Stylistic levelling is no less reprehensible. Every translator has his stylistic idiosyncracies which he may feel free to indulge in, as long as he does not translate. My own Swedish, both written and spoken, is rather conservative, in that I retain certain linguistic forms, such as subjunctive forms of verbs which went out of fashion fifty years ago. I have to be very careful to avoid such forms when I translate a colloquial Chinese text.

A translator who wishes to guard himself against the "normalization threat" should bear in mind that only empathy will guide him onto the right path. Empathy, not necessarily with the author but with the work, will give rise to a common sensitivity, which in turn will result in the stylistic identification of the original work and the translation.

The Western translator of Chinese literature, and especially of Classical Chinese poetry, is often frustrated by the pedantic and tyrannical demands of his own language which makes it impossible for him to convey the feeling of universality and timelessness which characterizes the original. Two courses are of course open to the translator: he can throw in the towel and abstain from translating, or he can struggle along, conscious of the fact that in every sentence and in every line he may be committing the sins of normalizing and levelling.

It is often argued that literature, and especially poetry, is untranslatable. I am personally convinced that much literature of lasting value has been carried across language borders by competent and devoted translators who have not allowed themselves to be intimidated by sometimes seemingly insuperable obstacles..