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## Translation as an alternative mode of expression (II)

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## TRANSLATION AS AN ALTERNATE MODE OF EXPRESSION (II) <sup>1</sup>

B. Hunter SMEATON, Calgary

"All things are full of labour; man cannot utter  
it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the  
ear filled with hearing."

*Eccl.*, I: 8

In the first portion of the present article it was found, in sum, that language is only one aspect of total communication (albeit the most obvious and tangible one), and that it often fails us, notably in its written forms. This fact, well known to the translator, is commonly not appreciated by his too often philistine and parochially-minded client.

It is rare, however, under the circumstances which concern most of us — namely, the translation of one European language into another — that the resourceful and imaginative translator cannot gloss over minor lexical non-correspondences in some manner without betrayal of his commitment. These tricks of the trade which are forced upon one include the following (to which the reader can doubtless add):

¶ 1. In the absence of a precise equivalent, use of a bridging or "straddling" term which embraces, in the target language, a more specific term which is obligatory in the language of departure. Thus, in Swedish (as in the other Scandinavian languages) there is a compulsory kinship distinction in the words for grandfather (*farfar* 'father's father', *morfar* 'mother's father') and uncle (*farbror*, *morbror* [*forbror* also functions as an honorific third person term of address used by children to male elders]). In many cases, the specification of these distinctions would not be relevant to the message, as in, "I used to love to hear my grandfather's stories". If, however, it were relevant, as when both a *farfar* and a *morfar* were mentioned in the same account, it would then be incumbent upon the translator to separate the two, for obvious reasons. This might be accomplished by inconspicuous interpolation at the time of the two characters' first introduction, or by literal rendition ("My mother's father, a native of Lund, etc."); and thereafter, the difference in relationship having been established, it might be sufficient to refer to them by name (say, "my Grandpa Jon" and "my Grandpa Sven"). In a legal document, of course, it would be not only stylistically permissible but legally essential to specify "pater-

(1) Cf. *J. des Trad.* 8.2 (1963): 39-45.

nal grandfather" and "maternal grandfather" throughout, however ugly the result. As for going from English into Swedish, one would under most circumstances use *farfar* as the generic equivalent, insofar as it didn't matter, and unless it were established, in the account itself or elsewhere, that it was the *morfar* <sup>2</sup>.

Sometimes, of course, research (drawing upon total evidence) will be necessary. Thus, in the building trades, the German *Installateur* covers both 'plumber' and 'electrician', the two skills being, in Germany, at least, embodied in a single individual (and indeed, as anyone who has worked in construction will know, many of the operations in the installation of pipe and the installation of wiring are identical). . . . For all that, however, one *can* be stymied, for lack of evidence, and where the distinction may be crucial. Then, and only then, should the translator resort to an explanatory footnote <sup>3</sup>.

In the case of Russian *sinii* (dark blue, royal blue) and *golubóy* (light blue), simply 'blue' will ordinarily suffice, unless some contrast between the two is implicit or otherwise important or appropriate. In going from English to Russian, the translator (assuming his knowledge of Russian to be fluent and spontaneous) has fixed associations to fall back on: 'ink', for example, is normally *sinii* and 'eyes' and 'the ocean' are normally *golubóy* (with due adjustments for number, gender and case).

¶ 2. Disregard of distinctions which are irrelevant in the context. As any North American who has been to France can tell you, *petit déjeuner* and 'breakfast' are not the same cultural phenomenon. Insofar as both are the first meal of the day, however, the two may ordinarily be equated in translation <sup>4</sup>.

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(2) As might be expected, "grandmother" must be *farmor* or *mormor*, "aunt" *faster* (from *farsyster*) or *moster*, etc. Similar problems are presented by Ger. *Geschwister*, Sw. *syskon*, etc.: going from English to either of these languages, the blanket word will do (and may, indeed, be stylistically preferable) when it is irrelevant to the message just how many brothers and/or sisters the person has. Going the other way, however, specification is required. Then there in Spanish, with its neutralization of sex distinction in the plural of kinship terms (unless both or all are female): does *mis hermanos* mean "my brothers", "my brothers and sisters", "my brothers and my sister" or "my brother and my sister"? One may be able to infer the state of affairs from the context — and one may not. *Los tíos* usually means one's aunt and uncle, on a probability basis; but it *may* mean one's uncles, or if distinct married pairs thus related to one are meant, one's uncles and aunts; etc. (Unequivocal, of course, is *mis padres* 'my parents'!) Situation context and information shared by interlocutors usually exclude ambiguity on the spoken level; but the translator alone with a better due tomorrow may have to make some shrewd judgments.

(3) Need it be said why? It is beyond the grasp of most mortals that other cultures are not a replica of their own (or if they aren't, they ought to be, they feel). Many are the clients who, in such a case, would assume the translator didn't know his business! . . . Human frailty aside, of course, a footnote always tends to shatter the reader's illusion that he is communicating directly with writer, rather than through an intermediary.

(4) On the metalinguistics of dining, see Vinay & Darbelnet, *Stylistique comparée*, p. 263 f.

¶3. Employment of a neologism or calque, preferably without explanation, when it is reasonably certain that the reader will understand and accept it (and, in the flow of context, not notice it). This principle (*if not abused!*) is particularly applicable in bilingual situations (e.g., French Canada). It may not be until the next millenium that the Académie Française gets round to *détersif* in its automatic washer connotation — by which time a generation or two of French Canadian users of *détersifs* may have been interred (and at least one generation of European Frenchwomen). . . . For translations directed to the European reader of French, it may well be that simply *savon* will be communicatively adequate (especially since, in situational context, 'soap' may equally well be used in English: "Don't put too much soap in your washer!").

. . . The novelty of the term or its stage of acceptance must always be considered, to be sure. This writer, at least, still shudders at the use of "world picture" in American anthropology literature to render *Weltbild*, just as much as he still feels mild nausea at the educationists' jargonistic "language arts" for the curriculum item formerly known as *English*.

¶4. Under select circumstances, adoption of the foreign term intact.

English, to be sure, is far more receptive to such adoptions than are many other languages, conditioned as it has been to this historically, starting with the Norman Conquest. This cannot be done indiscriminately, however. In some fields the foreign has more prestige than in others (e.g., fashion, as opposed to technology). The word should as a rule be one which is reasonably manageable in the recipient language, its meaning should be clear from context or with a minimum of explanation, and it should of course express a concept without native equivalent (thus, names of exotic foods, institutions or titles without exact or even approximate parallel, etc. — it is thus, for example, that we now have the Spanish word *junta*).

¶5. Deliberate warping of the target language, stylistically and even grammatically. This is often called for in connection with the translation of patents, where the prime consideration is not stylistic elegance but the legal interpretation which might be given by an attorney (scrupulous or otherwise) to the semantic implications of the word or phrase employed.

¶6. In the case of time- and space-bound allusions, where specificity

would contribute nothing to the total message, one is generally most faithful to the original by paraphrasing (though in some cases skilfully woven-in appositions may be more appropriate). A case in point is reference by name to the local mental or penal institution, as in the phrase, "He ought to be in [name of institution]!" The very naïve would-be translator has been known to substitute the name of the corresponding institution best known in his own area (a procedure guaranteed to leave the reader in knots of perplexity!). And how, then, to solve the problem? Perhaps simply with: "There's a fellow who ought to be put away!" (or: "... put away where he'll do no harm!" — if the context should call for it). . . . Such problems often come to the fore in the translation of the literature of a minority culture, by its very nature written for intra-cultural consumption and with no view to possible translation — and thereby, further, tending particularly to emphasize the unique features, problems and history of that

land and its people, as though to compensate for their neglect by those who write for the world at large<sup>5</sup>.

By resorting to the above, and other, devices (with the possible exception of ¶5), the skilled mediator between the languages of similar cultures can produce a translation which does not seem to be a translation — the ideal toward which all in the profession strive.

\* \* \*

So much for the more general translating situation where the underlying items of cultural content involved may be expected to have approximate counterparts in the two languages concerned, with no insoluble differences on the level of expression. But what if the cultures differ radically from one another? What if the "alternate modes of expression" formula becomes inapplicable, for lack of alternates within the prospective reader's ken? (Or technically put: what does one do where, in default of a signified, no signifier exists?) It is here, to be sure, that the severest translation problems arise (including the question whether one should translate at all!).

Yet, throughout history, fired by zeal or compulsion, there have been those undaunted by the challenge. A notable early example of this is Ulfilas' translation of the New Testament from Greek into Gothic<sup>6</sup>. A Goth himself, who rose to the rank of Bishop of the West Goths at the age of thirty, he preached among his countrymen first for seven years in Dacia; and after that, because of persecutions there, he led his followers across the Danube into Mœsia (the area surrounding Plevna in present-day Bulgaria). He was of course thoroughly bicultural (indeed, tricultural, since he also wrote in Latin). Before he could start his translation, he had to devise a system of writing for Gothic (which he did by simply using the Greek uncial letters

(5) The writer is reminded of a young lady, of American family but raised in Ecuador, who was undertaking to translate Jorge Icaza's Zola-esque novel *Huasi-pungo*, which portrays the dismal lot of the Ecuadorean Indian. She was stumped at how to render into English the broken Spanish characteristic of the Quechua-speaking natives. At last she had it: she would have them speak like uneducated American Negroes from the cotton-fields of the South! (After gently advising her against *this*, I still had no truly satisfactory answer for her. I could only suggest that she put their dialogue in a neutral, regionalism-free, somewhat substandard English — more easily said than done, of course.) ... Again one must caution against footnotes, if art is not to go by the board (see above my previous footnote against footnotes). On this account alone, the English translation of Sally Salminen's Swedish novel *Katrina* was probably the poorest of the some dozen other-language versions in which it appeared. Thus: "He hurried in, and Katrina followed him through the dark little *förstuga*.\*" The footnote to this reads: "A little porch or lobby projecting from the main building, often reached by a short flight of steps." Wouldn't simply "porch" have done? Or "dark and narrow little porch entrance"? Even an English neologism, such as "(dark little) porchway", would have passed unnoticed, and yet been a valid translation.

(6) Though fragments from Ezra and Nehemiah exist, they are inferior to Ulfilas' rendition of the Gospels, and it is the prevailing opinion that, while perhaps the entire OT may well have been translated into Gothic, it was done by other hands and certainly not completed until after his death (c. 382 A.D.). The main MS that has come down to us is the famous Codex argenteus (named for its silver binding), written in silver and gold letters on purple-stained parchment, the 187 of the original 330 pages which survive being now in the university library at Uppsala. Other major fragments are in Wolfenbüttel and Milan.

as far as they would go, and then drawing upon the runic and the Latin alphabets for the sounds without Greek equivalents<sup>7</sup>). It was here, however, that his actual labors began. All his keen acquaintance with the ways of his people — farmers, hunters and fishermen — and with the ramifications of their language certainly stood him in good stead; but it did not lessen the problem of communicating to them, in Gothic words, many concepts alien to them, yet basic to an understanding of the Gospel. For the more graphic and narrational passages, true, the task was not formidable. But what of frankincense and myrrh, or of baptism, resurrection, and the Holy Ghost?

His devices for the translation of concepts wholly or partially without precedent in Gothic culture were three: 1) in a minority of cases, he adopted the Greek word bodily (thus, the words for 'angel' and 'prophet'); 2) he used existing Gothic words in senses they had not previously possessed (e.g., for 'baptize', the word meaning simply 'to dip, immerse', and for 'resurrection', literally, 'up-rising'); and 3) descriptive compounds (in the manner of modern German) were employed. The word for 'piety, godliness', *gagudei*, was made up of *ga-* (marker of compound); *-gud-* 'God'; and *-ei* (derivational suffix denoting abstraction). 'The Flood' was *mid-jasweipáins*, lit., "[that which] embraced or enveloped the Earth", from *midjungards* 'earth, world' ('the Middle Domain') and *\*sweipan* 'to embrace, wrap, sweep up', plus the participial suffix *-áins*.

But to invent Gothic equivalents was still not enough. He and others, armed with the Word in Gothic dress, went forth to spread it, in the course of which mission the new terms were explained and took meaning — by a sort of oral exegesis. And thus the artificial *significántia* were given their *significata*, resulting in new linguistic signs; and communication was established. To this day, to be sure, the same process is being repeated (sometimes efficiently, sometimes not)<sup>8</sup>.

Even so do children learn adult vocabulary in their own language: the sound patterns and the grammatical arrangements they acquire, through imitation, in infancy; but the slots in the sentence pattern which contain the lexically significant items (in terms of the languages most of us know: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs), though they must be filled with some-

(7) This sensible procedure seems to have been peculiar to Byzantine Christianity and its missionaries (compare further the same policy some five hundred years later, when Cyril developed a writing system for the Bulgarians, later extended, with modifications, to the languages of all the Eastern Orthodox Slavs). Consider, in contrast, the horrors of modern Polish, French and (above all) English spelling, thanks to the procrustean Roman tradition of making the sounds of the Western vernaculars fit the 26 letters of Rome!

(8) Those interested in this topic should certainly, if they have not done so, read Eugene Nida's *Learning a Foreign Language: A Handbook for Missionaries* (2nd ed. 1950), obtainable from the Committee on Missionary Personnel, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 156 Fifth Ave., New York 10, N. Y. It is incidentally a very effective introduction to structural linguistics, and those who have been "walking like a cat around hot porridge" will appreciate its clarity-without-technicality, cemented by warmth and good humor (rivalled in this respect only by the works of Paul Roberts). Cf. foot-note 12, p. 119.

(8a) Since this article was written we have received Nida's *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden, 1964; Brill) — surely his crowning work, and for transcending our humble observations here. — B.H.S.

thing, are often filled by adults with terms which are trustingly repeated by children long before they fully understand them, in many cases (for example in hymns, anthems, pledges, school recitations, etc.)<sup>9</sup>.

To return, however, from the growth of the individual to the enlargement of the horizons of peoples, and lexical expansion in general: Most frequently the need to find words for concepts absent in another culture arises in connection with the industrialization of so-called pre-industrial societies, or the political elevation of a folk language to a national language — or some combination of these two factors. In either case, if the expansion of such a language is to succeed, there must be strong popular motivation and a dedicated and thorough educational follow-up.

For lack of motivation beyond the sentimental level (compounded by practical difficulties), the attempt to make Modern Irish a national language has been less than successful — through little fault of the Irish, one may add, since their native culture was too long deliberately and ruthlessly suppressed. Today the language is spoken spontaneously only in the remoter areas of Ireland, like the Western Isles, and its active vocabulary is predominantly rural in subject matter. Proceedings of the Dail are perfunctorily duplicated in Irish. And schoolchildren are obliged to study it, like a sort of Latin — and then go home and speak English. One can say "jet plane" and "television" (or for all I know, "leotard") in Irish — but one doesn't.

Quite different is the case of Modern Hebrew. The only artificial thing about it is that it was agreed upon (in preference to Yiddish, Ladino or English, to mention some of the languages considered — needless to say, German and Arabic, though the native languages of large numbers of immigrants and prior residents, were not on the list). Any language chosen would have been a success, however, for there was a real vacuum for it to fill. A polyglot population had to get together quickly and fight and build. As fast as scholars could create new terms (by combining traditional Hebrew roots with traditional morphological patterns), covering everything

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(9) Or they may folk-etymologize the term: A five-year-old boy in New York was fond of a musical suite entitled "The Plow that Broke the Plains". On being asked what the title meant to him, he let it be known that he wasn't too sure about the "plow", but the "plains" were certainly *airplanes*, like the ones that landed at nearby La Guardia Airport. ... A little girl explained that a "cedar" was so called because it dropped seeds. ... Foreign words are similarly treated: One Christmas, some children were singing the carol which, in its English version, keeps the German vocative phrase, "O Tannenbaum, ..." On close listening, one small boy was heard to be singing, "O cannon bomb, ..." another, "O cannonball ..." French Canadians will of course recall some of their children's efforts at the lines of "O Canada!" recorded in *Les insolences du Frère Untel* (see also Edmund Wilson's citation of these in *The New Yorker*, Nov. 21, 1964, p. 66). ... The whole matter was mischievously dealt with by Lewis Carroll in his mock-epic poem "The Jabberwocky" (in *Alice through the Looking-Glass*), where nonsense forms are inserted in the grammatical slots in which meaningful lexical items would be expected to occur ("Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe; etc."). Alice (in her perplexity at understanding its grammatical patterns but not the lexical items they held together) observed: "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas — only I don't know exactly what they are." ... This trick has also been done in German (cf. "Das grosse Lalulä" in Christian Morgenstern's *Galgenlieder*, where, however, the nonsense is complete, and only the exaggeratedly punctuated prosodic skeleton is left).

from the military to the industrial and the parliamentary, these were soaked up like water by a sponge.

The main precipitant force in the transformation of languages once adequate and self-sufficient into languages in sudden need of modern (viz., technological and governmental) vocabulary of course, has been emergent nationalism in areas where one or more folk languages and the language of the colonial power had until now lived in a symbiotic relationship: the first for home and field and bazaar, the second for offices, schools, newspapers, police courts and other institutions run by the *présence*. When the educated native shifted milieu, he shifted language, and usually attendant paraphernalia as well, such as manner of dress.

India comes first to mind. English, once the lingua franca of this teeming sub-continent, was to be replaced by Hindi (in Pakistan, by Urdu)<sup>10</sup>. A few zealots in India proper would have made the national language a modernized Sanskrit (which would be rather like restoring Latin in Italy). Objective reports on the status of Hindi 17 years later are hard to come by. But the general evidence is that English is still, to a substantial degree, limping along in its former rôle, and that the development and promulgation of Hindi has met with only moderate success — due in part, of course, to domestic political resistance by speakers of still other languages of major importance in India; but also to the failure of the government and its educational system in making the new coinages take hold. The study of English, meantime, is no longer generally required in the way it once was, resulting in a generation far less proficient in English, yet not at home in pure neo-Hindi. Many, therefore, are the problems to be resolved there (speaking of language problems alone).

The modernized and blown-up form of Malay known as Bahasa Indonesia has suffered from similar ailments — in some respects even more severe. For, while the British took the initiative in leaving India, in such a way that many ties to the former motherland remained undisturbed (notably the commercial), the departure of the Dutch from the East Indies was marked by bitterness to the end; and their language was to be erased from the scene where for over three centuries it had reigned. Nevertheless, in educated circles, it lingers on — sometimes in the use of Dutch words in a Bahasa Indonesia matrix, sometimes in conversations in pure Dutch (such as the writer himself heard, a scant three or four years ago, between two Indonesian employees of the Indonesian Consulate in New York).

Newly independent African states, for better or worse, are flirting with the same temptation. An attempt is now under way to make Hausa the language of parliamentary proceedings in Northern Nigeria, with a further view to extending it to official status in the non-Hausa South as well. And similar proposals (involving, at this point, mainly the replacement of

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(10) In their grammar and phonology, essentially the same language, sometimes spoken of collectively as Hindustani. On the lexical level, however, Hindi draws more heavily on vocabulary of Sanskrit derivation, while Urdu vocabulary makes vastly greater use of Arabic, particularly for abstractions (in a manner quite analogous to the dependence of English upon Old French and the classical languages). Nationalism, of course, has further exaggerated this difference.



English or French) are being made elsewhere on that continent. ...And now, in Ceylon, as of January 1st, 1964, English has been tossed out in favor of Sinhalese as the language of government.

One can feel sincere sympathy with the trend and understand it as a natural by-product of nationalism, at the same time admiring those concerned for their pride and enthusiasm. But *have* they thought it through ?

It is an axiom of structural linguistics — borne out by history — that *any* language is capable of unlimited lexical expansion (and therewith serving as the vehicle of an advanced civilization); nor have its phonological and grammatical peculiarities ever been a barrier to this. One may consider once somnolent Japan, which grew into a mighty industrial (and political) empire — all in terms of Japanese (and for all its unwieldy system of writing, besides). But what of Hausa? Or Sinhalese? They have words for 'salt'. But can they express 'sodium chloride'? We shouldn't stop them from trying. But history and other factors wholly outside of language proper will determine whether they merely invent technical terms, or whether genuine life is breathed into these inventions. In the meantime we may expect linguistic symbiosis to straggle on (this the exigencies of international communication will ensure); and that the languages which already have well-developed technical and other abstract vocabulary will continue to provide the link with the *grand monde* for a long time to come.

We close with two anecdotes from the author's own experience in Saudi Arabia which symbolize the problem outlined<sup>11</sup>:

In his quarters there he once had a vase of desert flowers, which withered and died. Addressing a houseboy (in Arabic), he asked: "Would you do me a favor and throw those flowers out? They're dead..." The lad was greatly amused at this, and hastened to tell another houseboy what the Amrikāni had said. ...The explanation? To the Arabs only man and animal kingdom have *life*. Flowers, therefore, cannot "die", any more than stones.

An American was sent out to the oilfields to institute a safety program. The fatalistic inhabitants walked barefoot over lumber scrap jutting with nails, sold the safety boots in the bazaar the day they were issued to them, refused to wear hard-hats, and in general were keeping the first-aid man very busy. The company's answer to this was an American safety engineer with a home grown safety education program under his arm. Soon blue-printed Arabic posters blossomed, which the literate minority read to the rest (in fact, they were looking for flaws in the Arabic as much as anything

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(11) There is a considerable amount of literature on the *Weltbilder* of particular cultures and their "segmentation of reality" in language and behavior — indeed, nearly every anthropologist of note has written something on the subject. Little attention, however, has been given to the practical *application* of the resultant body of theory where communication between widely divergent cultures is at stake (one notable exception, however, is UNESCO's 1953 Monograph on Fundamental Education VIII entitled *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*). The present article is a small attempt to further fill this gap — to suggest how the theory may be put into practice. For the need to do so is staring us in the face, as surely as the days of Kipling are over.

— to the Arab, a delightful form of entertainment). The commonest one was headed, in big letters (here transliterated): AS-SALAMATU AWWALAN! (“SAFETY FIRST!”, of course). However, *salāmah*, to the Arab, connoted not “safety” in the sense intended, but “security, peace and contentment (as of the soul), especially as granted to those who belong to the faith of Islam” (√ SLM meaning ‘peace; submission to the faith, and to the will of Allah’). ...That was 18 years ago, and the Saudi Arabs, under American guidance, have learned and prospered greatly in the meantime. And it is possible that *salāmah* may well now also connote safety boots and hard-hats as well. After all, it is only in the last few decades that we ourselves learned about industrial *safety*. ...What is more, we are ignorant of the infinite number of designations for the phenomena of nature with which the vocabulary of the “pre-industrials” abounds.

When two such worlds come into contact, their languages and other forms of behavior and self-expression never coincide. At best, they partially overlap. It is not for us merely to sit back and hope, however, that the transitions will be smooth. Expert assistance is needed in the formulation and implementation of intelligent and workable language policies, in which the help of experienced translators, lexicographers, general linguists and specially trained teachers is needed every bit as much as that of engineers (though the latter’s contributions are of course more immediate and tangible). Can we bring this message to the New Administrators? There are many of us grinding out documents who would like to add something of lasting value to the world.



A Company recently sent their translator the following after-Christmas card. It is a tiny little translation, which they found in an old science book published in London in 1843.

*“Every translator ought to regard himself as a broker in the great intellectual traffic of the world, and to consider it his business to promote the barter of the produce of mind. For, whatever people may say of the inadequacy of translation, it is, and must ever be, one of the most important and meritorious occupations in the great commerce of the human race.”*

GOETHE  
KUNST UND ALTERTHUM

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Extracted from *On the Subject of Translation*, by Robert Addis, CalChap, ATA, cf. p. 122.



Nouveauté

JEAN DARBELNET

# REGARD sur le FRANÇAIS ACTUEL

Des chroniques pleines d'intérêt et d'actualité  
sur les grands problèmes de la langue courante :

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