

A NOTE ON TRANSLATION (part of a lecture, March 2001)

My experience of translating does not correspond to what is implied by the metaphors that are often used for it, nor even to those contained in the very word “translation”.

Etymology may be out of fashion, but it seems important to be aware that we think by means of hidden metaphors much of the time, not all of them “dead”. Hidden in the Latin-derived verb “to translate” is an idea of “carrying across”, since “latum” is the irregular past passive participle of “fero”, I carry. To translate: to transfer. Like someone walking over a bridge with a bundle? (But what is in the bundle?)

The same is suggested by German “übertragen”, while “übersetzen”, the more common German word for “translate”, though also suggesting a bridge, dwells, rather, on the end of the crossing, the setting down of the bundle on the other side: übersetzen: over-set. Meanwhile French “traduire” and Italian “tradurre” mean “to draw or lead across”, and in English, too, “traduce” could mean “translate” until the nineteenth century. In Russian it still does: pere-vodit’ – to translate or to lead across. So one leads a person or animal across the bridge, rather than carrying a box or bundle over it. It could be worth pondering what kind of difference this slightly different metaphor implies.

But what I mainly want to point out is that all these usages imply that I, the translator, go with it, *with* my parcel or my oxen, and none prefers an idea of bringing bundle or beast from somewhere else hither, to “me” here: hierherführen, apportier, prinosit’ or privodit’ do not mean “translate”. Nor does any of our words for “translate” invoke an idea, say, of sending the thing or person from here hither, as would be meant by “transmit” or “übersenden”, both of which mean, instead, “to broadcast”. (Curiously enough, Russian has borrowed the actual word “translation”, russified as “transliatsiia”, to mean, precisely, a “broadcast”.)

And yet a dynamic topography of bringing *from* somewhere else *to* here, and of sending *from* here *to* somewhere else, is what is implied by the confusing metaphors which occur in much recent theorising about translation: people talk about a “source” language and a “target” language.

If the language I translate into (the second, or translation, language) is my “target”, it is as if I am sending my arrow (or other, less aggressive, object) from where I stand, towards some place away from myself. This is very strange. Do some translators really feel this way about their work? And if the language I translate out of (the first, or original, language) is my “source”, it is a bit like calling it the origin of a river – which surges up somewhere, flows out, increases along the way, and finally issues into, presumably, the wide sea of the second language – all of which is incompatible with the “target” image, as well as leaving out the translator’s part in what happens.

These two images – “source” and “target” – not only conflict rather violently with each other and therefore ought not, in my view, to be used of translating, which is not an inwardly conflicting process, but they also conflict with the notion contained in the words “translate, übersetzen, traduire, perevodit’ ”. These words properly, as I see it, associate the translator with the translating, but also, less properly, represent the translator as carrying or leading something from one place to another. I resist both versions of this image of a bridge or a crossing, almost as much as I resist the “source” and “target” imagery, because it lets us assume that something is taken across *entire*. But what can be taken across *entire* in a translation? Only the paraphraseable content. That may be enough in translating journalistic or scientific texts, but it is not enough for literary ones.

I don’t myself experience translating as any kind of transferral. But rather – as a lifting up of chosen parts of my own language in order to bring them close to those arranged parts of another language with which I hope to acquaint English-readers. Raising up parts of the second language, my own, as if on the airily uplifted spread palm of a hand, not aggressively but generously, not shooting but offering, towards the already airborne selection from the first language, the foreign one; lifting it until the two nearly touch, or do touch. (Ideally, there would be a clasping of hands.) So instead of carrying over, trans-lating, I bring close, ap-prox-imate, enable one thing to approach another.

By the way, even further back etymologically, the concept of raising one thing towards another may be cunningly contained in the very word “trans-late”, since that irregular past participle “latum” was once “tlatum” and belonged (as does “tuli”, the past tense of “fero”) to the verb “tollo”: I lift – familiar to us from the prayer to the Agnus Dei “qui tollis peccata mundi” as well as from the word “toll”, a payment which is levied or raised (often for passage over a bridge!). This small and misty element of elevation accords well with my translating experience and almost reconciles me to the word “translate”.

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