

Translating As Preserving Text's Meaning Through Equivalences

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One of the great difficulties translators encounter, when they attempt a translation, mainly in their early careers, is the fidelity to the spirit of the text. They are pressed by the strong hold of the text and its texture, particularly its semantic and linguistic elements.

What could be done for a translation and for the transfer of meaning from SLT (*Source Language Text*) to the TLT (*Target Language Text*)? Can we translate the meaning or what vehicles the meaning? Can we translate the structure of the text or what the structure holds as meaning? Is there a possibility, or a probability or an impossibility in translation? Are there any other means and processes which give priority to sense before structure? Can equivalences be the only conclusive, effective and final solution for translation? If yes, how could it be? If no, what could be done?

In an introduction to Difference in Translation, Joseph F. Graham underlines the importance of meaning as well as form in translation. For him, both the message and what it vehicles as meaning, and the mode of encoding such message should be translated, or at least transformed 'objectively' and 'faithfully' to the target language (TLT). "Meaning," Graham points out, "is not just what can be translated in practice but rather what can be translated in principle, which is also what can be expressed in principle."¹

Meaning cannot be revealed to the translator, if the latter does not decode what has already been encoded in the SLT. He needs, first and foremost, to be 'impinged' by the linguistic as well as semantic textures of the text. In other words, after understanding the whole structure (meaning and form) of the text, he tries, carefully, to

deconstruct it in its source and reconstruct it in his TLT. No transposed form of SLT against TLT is acceptable. If so, it makes translation very artificial. However, when the meaning is grasped, the form becomes very manageable. Graham asserts that:

A true or real translation is transparent to the text that it exhibits the literal difference of language in translation. [...] And so it is an error to oppose form and meaning, eventually sacrificing the one for the other, since the very aim of translation is to resonate in one language the meaning that adheres to the form in another.²

This idea is also emphatically shared by both John Beekman and John Callow who claim that:

A translation which transfers the meaning and the dynamics of the original text is to be regarded as a faithful translation. The expression *transfers the meaning* means what the translation conveys to its readers or hearers.³

But the transfer of meaning from SLT to TLT needs some effective modes and processes which make the TLT similar, or nearly similar, to SLT. "The transfer," says Lawrence Venuti, "should not merely get along with the author, nor merely find him likeable; there should also be an identity between them."⁴ In other words, the translator in the TLT should not be remarkable. Moreover, he should invite the author of the STL to occupy the whole space of TLT, i.e., when we read a text in TLT, we recognize its original author (author of SLT), not its translator. This job can never be successful, if the translator neglects, whether intentionally or not, the similarities as well as dissimilarities between languages and cultures of both texts (SLT and TLT). The translator has no right to remove or distort, or transform such dissimilarities. "Translation," says André Lefevere in his article "Translation: Its Genealogy in the West", "usurps authority, but translation also

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bestows authority. It bestows authority on a language.”⁵ But the form envelops the meaning, and no meaning is ever grasped if there is no closer, serious deciphering of the form. “The linguistic meaning of a word,” says Mark Bevir in his article “What Is a Text? A Pragmatic Theory,” “comes from the concept to which it conventionally refers.”⁶

What Mark Bevir has pointed out is also underlined by Katherine Reiss who attests that:

Le but doit être de reproduire dans la traduction l'essentiel du texte de départ et en particulier les éléments qui font appartenir ce texte à tel ou tel type de texte. Rien ne peut autoriser à enfreindre cette règle.⁷

In the text, there are different semantic possibilities. It looks like a mine. When we expect to find silver, we discover, instead and unexpectedly, gold. In other words, the more you dig in, the more you find the unexpected. But, the unexpectedness becomes a real obstacle, if we don't try how to avoid it and solve it out.

Translation is a kind of ‘replacement’ of the cultural and linguistic differences of a foreign text with the language of the target language whose culture and linguistic structures are different from the SLT. Venuli points out:

Translation is a process which the chain of signifiers that constitutes the source-language text is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target-language which the translator provides on the strength of an interpretation.⁸

But this ‘replacement’ can never be positively possible if the translator cannot adopt some prerequisite elements summed up in the following quote of John Simon:

But what, ideally, would a good translator be? First, one which the translator serves the author more than himself. This seems obvious, indeed is so, except to a good many translators, particularly famous ones. Second, a good translation is a balancing act: keeping

perfect equilibrium between absolute literariness (fidelity to the minutest features of the original) and total freedom (using the translator's language in its most natural, idiomatic way), which is to say in a manner inevitably different from that of the original.⁹

He also adds that:

Through familiarity with and love for the work to be translated are obvious prerequisites. So, too, is intimate knowledge of both languages, for the good translator must know everything the best dictionary knows as well as everything the best dictionary does not know.¹⁰

But since we can grasp the meaning of a text, and never copy the same linguistic structure, it becomes enforcing that the only way out to a good translation is to express such meaning in a special structure particular to TLT, but, nonetheless, closer to SLT. In other words, the translator should seek equivalences between SLT and TLT.

Equivalence, thus, comes as a means of replacement of a text in one language into another language. Though the ideal of "total equivalence is a chimera,"¹¹ it is the only possibility, I see, which makes translation more plausible. But equivalent in what? It is not, of course, in its semantic texture, but in its linguistic structure. I mean the form of expression. Bell points out:

The translator has the option, then, of focusing on finding *formal* equivalents which 'preserve' the context—free semantic sense of the text at the expense of its context—sensitive communicative value or finding *functional* equivalents which 'preserve' the context—sensitive communicative value of the text at the expense of its context—free semantic sense.¹²

Roger T. Bell differentiates between two modes of process of translation: the literal translation and the free translation. The former is the word-for-word translation, whereas the latter is meaning-for-meaning translation. Bell does not, of course, opt for any of the two,

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since the first can never give the true meaning of the text, and the second cannot preserve style. He writes:

Pick the first and the translator is criticized for the 'ugliness' of a 'faithful' translation; pick the second and there is criticism of the 'inaccuracy' of a 'beautiful' translation. Either way it seems, the translator cannot win, even though we recognize that the crucial variable is the *purpose* for which the translation is being made, not some inherent characteristic of the text itself.¹³

Seemingly, Bell leans to the second type, though he recognizes the plurality of meaning of text. "Translation," he says, "cannot be judged according to mathematics-based concepts of semantic equivalence or one-to-one correspondence."¹⁴ It should be judged, instead, to the degree and to what extent the equivalences are faithful to the spirit and source of the SLT.

Bell, however, has given for the translator some prerequisite elements for any process of translation, which keeps guard to the fidelity of the text. These prerequisites could be summed up in six major points:

1-Meaning (*Whatness*): The semantic denotation or/and connotation of the text.

2-The Intention of the Reader (*Whyness*): What the sender wants to communicate.

3-The Moment and the Period the Text is Written in (*Whenness*): The historical and personal contexts.

4-The Mode of Communication (*Howness*): The way and manner the message is sent and delivered.

5-The Social Background of both the Text and the Author (*Whereness*): The social scope of the text as well as that of the author.

6-Participants Involved in the Text (*Who is Who*): The sender and the receiver.

Besides such prerequisites, Bell emphasizes the importance of language and what it possesses as *phonological, syntactic, lexical*

and *semantic* features. Furthermore, he underlines the importance of some *markers* of the use of language itself, as the relationship between the sender and receivers (addressee relationship), the *channels* selected for transmission of the message and the *function* of the discourse (domain).

Bell suggests that there are Three distinguishable meanings for the word translation. It can refer to:

1-**Translating**: The process (to translate the activity rather than the tangible object);

2-**A Translation**: The product of the processes of translating (i.e., the translated text);

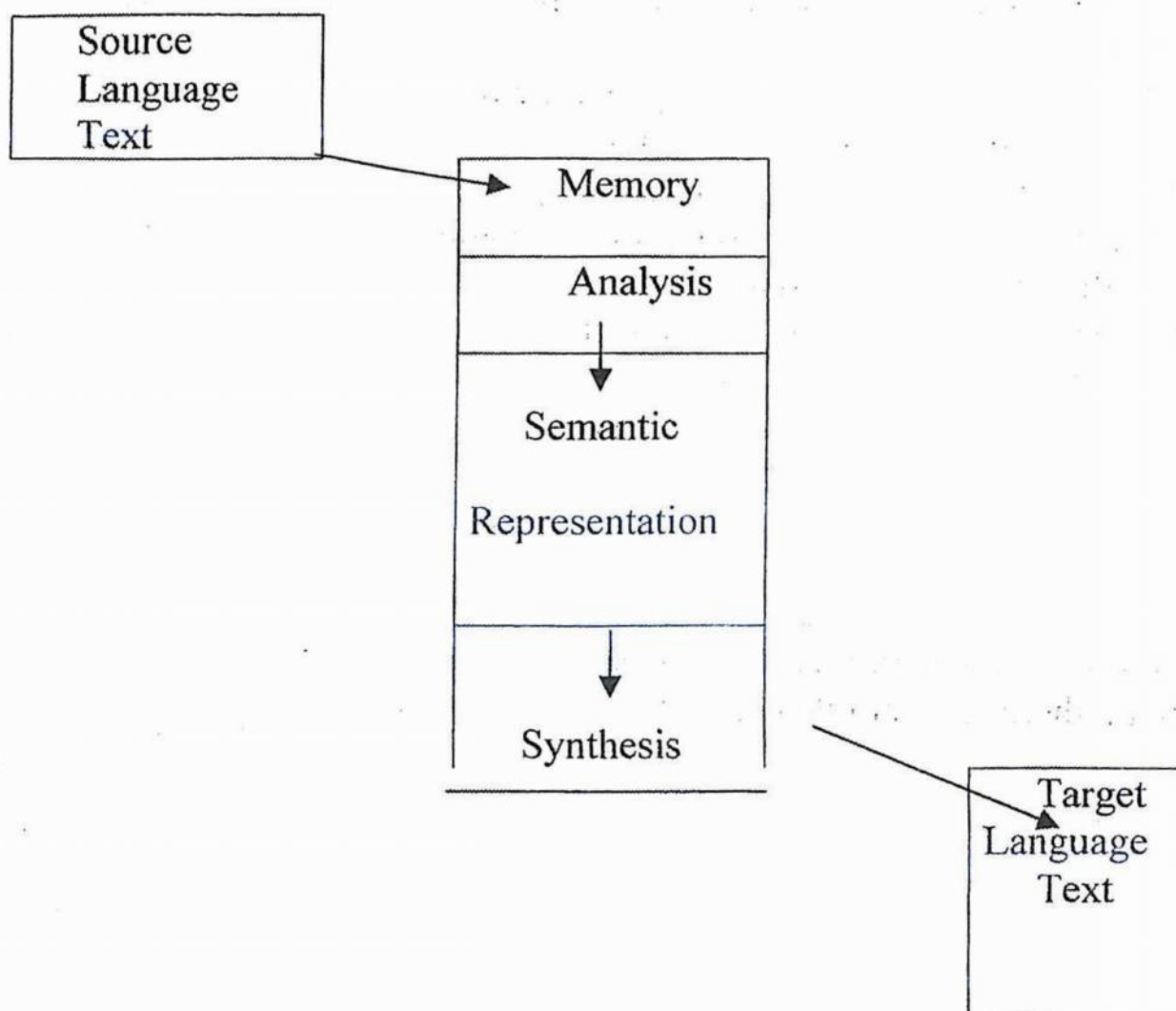
3-**Translation**: The abstract concept which encompasses both the process of translating and the product of such process.¹⁵

Bell goes further claiming that in order to have a comprehensive and useful theory of translation, we must attempt to describe and explain both the process and the product, i.e., the way of translating and translation itself. He claims that the process is mental, i.e., it happens in the mind of the translator. Thus, it leads us to psychology (as the study of perception and memory), and cognitive science, etc... But, though the process happens in the mind of the translator, it, nonetheless, involves language. Subsequently, the social and psychological aspects of language are of great importance.

What could be said is that translators should be more consciously aware of language and the resource it contains. They should know about language and how its system operates. In other words, they need to master the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic explanation basing their processes of decoding the signal and selecting the channel on the "nature of the message and on the ways in which the resources of the code are drawn upon users to create meaning—carrying signs and the fact that the sociocultural approach is required to set the process in context."¹⁶

As it goes, Bell gives us a scheme of the mechanism of the translation process, which is very illustrative.

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Translation Process¹⁷

This scheme reads as follows: there is a transformation of the SLT into TLT by means of **Three** processes that happens all in the mind of the translator:

1-There is a kind of analysis of the texture of the SLT in the mind of the translator.

2-Such analysis is settled up by some semantic representations.

3-A Synthesis of such semantic representations leads to equivalences in TLT.

Clearly, all is equivalence. And any equivalence is ever plausible if the translator of the text (SLT) into the text (TLT) preserves the

semantic and, where possible, the stylistic characteristics of the SLT into TLT.

Equivalences are related to the nature of the process which creates the representation of the original product. “[We must] adopt a *descriptive* rather than a *prescriptive* approach to our investigation of the process.”¹⁸ In other words, there should be a focus and concern on the process of translation, not on translation itself, since translation is only a product—a result of the process.

The good translator should not displace the author. Instead, he should serve him more than himself. He should equilibrate between the absolute fidelity to the original text, and, at the same time, have a total freedom to manipulate his own language use so that he could represent such fidelity ‘objectively.’

Finally, I would say, when we hear a voice recognized as the author’s, but never as the translator’s, nor even as the mixture of both, there is a definite possibility that this translation is good.

Endnotes

¹ Joseph F. Graham, « The Introduction, » in Difference in Translation, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1985),p.18.

² Ibid.,pp.84-5.

³ John Beekman, and John Callow, Translating the Word of God (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1974),p.34.

⁴ Lawrence Venuti, A History of Translation : The Translator’s Invisibility (London, New York : Routledge, 1995),p.273.

⁵ André Lefevere, « Translation : Its Genealogy in the West, » in Translation, History and Culture, eds. Susana Bassnet, and André Lefevere (London, New York: Pinter Publishers, 1990),p 23

⁶ Mark Bevir, « What Is a Text ? A Pragmatic Theory, » in International Philosophical Quarterly, Vol.42, N°4 (December 2002),p.496.

⁷ Katherine Reiss, La Critique des Traductions, ses Possibilités et ses Limites, Trans. C. Bocquet (Paris : Artois Press Universitaire, 2002),p.41.

⁸ Lawrence, Venuti,p.17

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⁹ John Simon, « Comment on Translation, » in Poetry, Vol.176, N°6 (September 2001),p.336.

¹⁰ Ibid.,p.337.

¹¹ Roger T. Bell, Translation and Translating: Theory and Practice (London, New York: Longman, 1991),p.6.

¹² Ibid.,p.7.

¹³ Ibid.,p.7.

¹⁴ Ibid.,p.18.

¹⁵ Ibid.,p.13.

¹⁶ Ibid.,p.20.

¹⁷ Ibid.,p.21.

¹⁸ Ibid.,p.22.