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WORDS OR MEANING?

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Abstract – In the following pages, a brief, personal outline of the history of translation is sketched, so as to determine the whys and wherefores of the form/content dichotomy that seems to be plaguing translators and translation theorists incessantly. From the outset, in Classical times, sense rules supreme. In the late middle ages with the advent of Bible translation in Europe, the word – being the word of God – assumes new-found importance, especially as any deviation from it implies heresy. With Neo-Classicism and the Age of Enlightenment, the original tenets of antiquity unsurprisingly make their comeback, though somewhat short-lived this time. With the Romantics and post-Romantics, foreign lands and cultures gain ever greater interest, as indeed do their various forms of expressions. In contemporary Europe, over the last hundred years or so, with its preoccupation for markets and product diversification, the two schools of thought seem to co-habit quite comfortably, notwithstanding modern linguistic theory that renders form and content into indivisible components of language, thus making the dichotomy fatuous.

Keywords: form; content; Neo-classicism; Romanticism; present-day.

The fundamental question that students of translation desire to have an answer to constitutes in fact an age-old controversy dating back to Classical times: should one translate form or translate content? In other words, when you have a text in front of you that someone has asked you to translate, do you stay as close to the original as possible or are you free to ignore or even change the words and to re-elaborate the meaning as you best see fit?

An analogy may be drawn here in order to illustrate exactly what the choice is all about, if indeed there is a choice. Everybody knows the Ferrari sports car, the fabulous *Testarossa*. Now, if the Japanese, say, wish to reproduce the *Testarossa*, what is going to be more important for the imitators – what it looks like or how it performs or the motor under the bonnet? To apply Chomsky to car manufacturing, is it the surface structure or the deep structure that counts? It is a silly question really because, as everyone knows, you cannot separate the various components, the chassis, the body work, the look, the motor, the performance, even the noise it makes, all are essential components of what makes the *Testarossa* what it is. You cannot put a Ferrari motor into a Toyota and call it a Ferrari any more than you can put a Toyota motor into a *Testarossa* body. Yet, this is what has been going on in literary translation for



centuries and, indeed, what translation theorists too have been discussing for a very long time in their attempts to formulate abstractions for the translation process.

This controversy, or dichotomy if you will, goes back at least two thousand years – back to Cicero and beyond to Ancient Egypt (which is why translation is jokingly referred to as the "second oldest profession"). Cicero, more than one hundred years before the birth of Christ, was the precursor of the "non verbum e verbo sed sensum exprimere de sensu" principle ("not word for word but sense from sense"), a maxim reiterated on countless occasions by great translators and theorists alike: Horace, Saint Jerome (the Patron Saint of Translation), Pope, Tytler, Cary, Pound and Steiner. From these names, it can be easily evinced that sense-to-sense translation has been advocated for not only in Classical and neo-Classical times, but right through to the 20th century and, in all probability, it will continue well into the 21st century as well.

It must be said, though, that literal, word-for-word translation has had no shortage of fans over the centuries either. Its popularity was somewhat enforced from the Middle Ages when Bible translation was very much coming to the fore. The very act of translating the Bible was seen by the authorities as a form of heresy and an act of sedition. John Wycliffe, the first translator of the Holy Scriptures into the vernacular (Wycliffe 1390), somehow managed to avoid the consequences of such a serious offence, at least during his lifetime. Although he was a known pre-Reformation, religious dissident, his considerable influence as an Oxford don, philosopher and theologian must have contributed not a little to saving his life. It was probably owing to his adherence to the words of the original Latin text as well in that, although the syntax of the English may have left a lot to be desired, it was always rigorously as close as possible to "the word of God".

Latin Vulgate: Dixitque Deus fiat lux et facta est lux King James: And God said, Let there be light: and there was light Early Wycliffe: And God seide, Be maad li3t; and maad is li3t (Genesis 1, p. 3)²

Wycliffe's excessively close literality doubtless saved him from the stake, but only just. After his death in 1384, at the ripe old age (in those days) of 56, his body was exhumed and burnt. The authorities – better late than never they

² There are two distinct versions of the Wycliffe Bible. The first, appearing while Wycliffe was still alive in the early 1380s, is today a rarity. The second, thought to have also been the work of several of his collaborators, came out some years after Wycliffe's death and the subsequent banning and burning of his books.



¹ A quick glance at google.com or similar search engines will soon show that politics and/or spying take pride of place as the second oldest profession, though translation theorists are quick to point to methodological analogies.

thought – finally came to the conclusion he had been a heretic after all and should be made an example of.

Just over a hundred and fifty years later, William Tyndale was not so lucky. The Tyndale Bible (Tyndale 1534) was the first ever to be translated directly from Greek and Hebrew texts and it greatly influenced the outcome of the Reformation in England. A considerable part of his work was later to be integrated into the James I's Authorised Version. Tyndale himself, nevertheless, was tried for heresy, choked, impaled and, still alive, burnt at the stake in 1536. Tyndale had not been authorised to translate the Bible and the edict against Wycliffe, which had categorically stated that unauthorised translations done by the laity amounted to heresy, was still very much in force. Consequently, Tyndale found himself on trial for corrupting the Scriptures by changing certain words and their meanings.

A decade later, a similar fate was to await a great French translator, Etienne Dolet, who was strangled and burned in 1546, accused of being an atheist. It made no difference whatever that his writings are among the very first in history to deal with the question of how to translate. Posterity will, nonetheless, always remember him for being one of the founding fathers of our modern profession to whom, in the words of Eugene Nida (1964, p. 15), "the credit for the first formulation of a theory of translation must go".

Translators being killed in the exercise of their profession is not something reserved for the barbaric Middle Ages either. Hitoshi Igarashi, aged only 44, was stabbed to death for translating Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses which fundamentalist Muslim groups considered heresy and therefore punishable by death. The murder took place on the 12th of July 1991, just over twenty years ago. History has a way of repeating itself at fairly regular intervals.

It must not be thought that the literalist approach to translation was restricted to early Bible translation only, for it has had its proponents right up to the present day as well. Generally speaking, the neo-Classical period like its Classical model may be said to have been freer, more imitative than what today would be considered translation proper. But John Dryden, the father of translation theory in England at the outset of the 18th century, claimed that it was "the greatest wrong (...) to the memory and reputation of the dead" (Dryden 1680, pp. 17-18). It should be pointed out that he did not like literal, word-for-word translation much, either. He called it being "servile" and a "foolish task", strongly criticising Ben Jonson and other poets for such foolish servility, calling such impropriety the work of a mere "verbal copier" rather than a translator proper.

Two examples may well serve to see what it was exactly that gave rise to such harsh words with regard to translations of the time. A favourite has to be a translator by the name of Henry Boyd, a reverend gentleman of the 18th



century who, in 1785, gave his cultured English readership the following verses:

When life had labour'd up her midmost stage,
And, weary with her mortal pilgrimage,
Stood in suspense upon the point of Prime;
Far in a pathless grove I chanc'd to stray,
Where scarce imagination dares display,
The gloomy scenery of the savage clime.
On the deep horrors of the tangled dell,
With dumb dismay, the pow'rs of mem'ry dwell,
Scenes, terrible as dark impending fate!" (Boyd 1785, p. 1)

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura ché la diritta via era smarrita. Ah quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte che nel pensier rinova la paura! Tant'è amara che poco è più morte; ma per trattar del ben ch'io vi trovai, dirò dell'altre cose eh' i' v'ho scorte. (*Inferno* I, Il, pp. 1-9)

The division into the three corresponding tercets of Dante's poem is highly approximative, as there is little correspondence between the source and target texts. What is interesting to note is the translator's efforts at "domesticating" his text, to use a term coined by Lawrence Venuti (1995, p. 20). The fierce "selva selvaggia" becomes an English *grove* and then, later on, a *dell*. In Canto XXXIII of the *Inferno*, there is the awful scene of Count Ugolino eating his children, which Dante compares to a dog on the bone:

come d'un can all'osso (Inferno XXXIII, l, p. 78)

Boyd's attempts at *domesticating* lead to ridicule, as the vicious "cane" of the original becomes a *staunch bloodhound*. The image of the loyal, lovable hunting dog may well be in perfect keeping with English culture, but it is diametrically opposed to the savage treachery of Dante's description. Literal translation was to come to the fore some eighty to a hundred years later in the Victorian Age and, to be kind, fares little better. The literalists believe so much in the word that everything else is sacrificed at the altar of literalism. It is the heyday of prose, of prose translations and, indeed, it must be said, of being downright prosaic. The well-known American poet and translator from the Harvard Dante Circle, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, has no doubt when he opts for just that:

In translating Dante, something must be relinquished. Shall it be the beautiful rhyme that blossoms all along the line like a honeysuckle on the hedge? It must



be, in order to retain something more precious than rhyme, namely, fidelity, truth – the life of the hedge itself. (Longfellow 1867, p. vii)

Thomas Carlyle's younger brother Joseph, back in England, provides a fitting example that illustrates the absurdity and *foolishness* of being *servile* to the words and syntax of the original. If, in Italian, it is acceptable to say, as Dante does in the opening Canto of the *Inferno*:

Ma non sì che paura non mi desse La vista che m'apparve d'un leone (*Inferno* I, ll, pp. 44-45)

the same cannot be said of its English prose translation which reads

yet not so, but that I feared at the sight, which appeared to me, of a lion. (Carlyle 1849, p. 5).

Unfortunately, Carlyle's English prose translation not only totally fails to render the poetry of the Italian original, but it also fails miserably at even minimally respecting the syntax of the English language.

The two extremes of words versus meaning when translating literature were to continue right through the 20th century too, in spite of Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, who quite unequivocally stated that the two components of a sign, which he called the *signifiant* and the *signifié* are indivisible. Simply put, modern linguistics and semiotics were showing that form and content are merely constituent parts of a linguistic sign which are distinguishable, but not separable. The significance of de Saussure's work was universally influential except, it seems, for translators, who were generally unimpressed. They had grown accustomed and even fond of their ditheistic translation model and had little or no time for monotheism.

Translators would show they were ahead of the times and up-to-date through a series of terminological changes. So, the old free, imitative approach was to give way to what was now the *hermeneutic*, or interpretative approach of Ezra Pound and George Steiner. The literal approach instead became *formal* translation, sometimes referred to negatively as *transcodage*, which Danica Seleskovitch and Marianne Lederer define as being glued to the words and sentence structures of the original, "de se coller aux mots, et aux structures des phrases de l'original" (2001, p. 19).

This latter approach was vehemently propounded by the famous Russian-American writer/critic/translator, Vladimir Nabokov, of *Lolita* fame. Nabokov managed to make Alexander Pushkin's Russian masterpiece *Eugene Onegin* into an often incomprehensible jumble of Russian syntactic constructions in English. Not by chance is his most famous paper on translation entitled *That Servile Path* (1966, p. 98) – a reprise of the servility mentioned



by Dryden centuries earlier, though this time upheld in a much more positive light.

Another excellent example of 20th-century literalism can be seen in the translations of D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence loved Italy deeply and chose to live not a small part of his life first in Liguria, then the Abruzzo region, Florence, Capri, and finally, in 1921, his great love, Sicily. While there, he wrote three important essays: *Twilight in Italy, Sea and Sardinia* and *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, and became acquainted with the works of the great Sicilian novelist, Giovanni Verga, through his having read the short story, *Cavalleria rusticana*, on which Pietro Mascagni's opera was later based. When Lawrence read *Mastro Don Gesualdo* and *I Malavoglia*, he immediately found the Italian novelist's use of language fascinating and wanted to translate him. He described Verga as Homeric and thought that only someone like himself could be up to the task of rendering him in English:

He is extraordinarily good (...) and it would need somebody who could absolutely handle English in the dialect to translate him. (Lawrence 1956, p. 528).

Lawrence firmly believed his translation (translation in general too) had a didactic function, in that it informed the English readership about the way foreigners (Sicilians in this case) actually express themselves. A simple exclamation like "per bacco" becoming by Bacchus instead of By Jove or Heavens Above is quite easy for the English reader to handle. As is even somewhat contorted syntax like:

Dall'uscio spalancato a due battenti entrarono poco dopo don Giuseppe e mastro Titta. (p. 64)

Through the wide-open double doors entered after a few moments Don Giuseppe and Master Titta.

The word order certainly grates on the ear of the English reader and the appellative "Master" gives the idea of an under-aged male, rather than a professional *maestro*. But little harm done.

However, when exclamations like "San Gregorio il Magno!" are translated as *Saint Gregory the Great!* or when expressions like "fare il passo più lungo della gamba" [to bite off more than you can chew] become *to take your stride according to your legs*, then it is not at all surprising to see quizzical looks upon the faces of the English readers. Also upon translation commentators who had understood from Lawrence's own declared intentions that the reader could expect "English in the dialect"! Maybe it ambiguously meant English in the Sicilian dialect.

Lawrence's translations of Verga, to be fair, are extremely interesting, notwithstanding the multitude of flaws they contain. Nabokov and Lawrence



are supreme examples of 20th-century *foreignization*, to use Venuti's term once again. But the proponents of domesticated translation abound too, to such an extent that Christopher Taylor (1989, p. 91) claims that it is often easier to read a work in translation than it is to read the original. He cites the translations of Joyce where it is evident that readability is much greater in Italian than it is in the original English – the translator having done much of the work for the "linguistically lazy reader", to use Ezra Pound's (1934, p. 14) damning assessment of British and American readership.

Translators throughout history have taken it upon themselves to do all or most of the work for the reader. They explain, correct, adapt, disambiguate, and even interpret texts for you. The most extreme case is probably when the immortal opening line of the Inferno of Dante Alighieri

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita

is rendered with the totally uninspired prosaicness of a crib-writer:

When I was thirty five.

The English novelist Dorothy Sayers, of Lord Peter Wimsey fame, although one of the nobler attempts at rendering the "terza rima" in English, fares little better at an interpretative level. Sayers in her lengthy introduction to the Penguin version of the Divine Comedy states quite categorically that the "treasure" she finds in the original Italian is its humour. Consequently, when Dante and Virgil come face to face with a demon, the poet exclaims

Wow what a grizzly look he had upon him! (Inferno XXI, l, p. 31)

The trouble with the hermeneutic approach is that the translator decides a priori how a literary text should be interpreted and the reader takes it or leaves it, though most of the time convinced that was what the original author or poet actually meant.

An extreme case in point is an English translation of the French poet Francis Ponge on the part of the modern Scottish poet George Macbeth, who died just 25 years ago. A follower of George Steiner's hermeneutic approach, Macbeth had no qualms at all about making the original poem about an insect "La Guèpe" into an English poem about a woman. Presumably, inspiration for this adaption comes from the gender marking in French. Wasps in Romance languages are feminine (*vespa* in Italian *avispa* in Spanish) and so the Scottish poet had no hesitation in turning "La Guèpe" into "the Wasp Woman" (Macbeth 1966, p. 331), with her sting ready to be used not against "Mankind" but against "Men-kind".

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³ (2004) claims that, of the various English translations, Sayers "does the best in at least partially preserving the hendecasyllables and the rhyme".

Other examples of *domestication* originate from the impositions of publishing houses and editors. If Neo-Classical England was not too fond of literature coming from abroad and whenever it did manage to cross the English Channel it needed to be improved, the same is true in Italy in much of the 20th century. The principles of "il bello scrivere" which go back to Leopardi are consolidated under fascism in the 1920s and 1930s and the motto *Italia agli italiani* had its linguistic counterpart in *l'italiano agli italiani*. The concept of good writing permeated throughout most of the century, thanks to the editorial policies of the major Italian publishers, which influenced even the way works were translated.

In 1922, the first Italian *Dracula* came out. The translator, or more probably the publisher, did not even spell the author's name correctly, calling the Irish novelist *Brahm* Stoker rather than Bram Stoker. And what of dear old Professor Abraham van Helsing, famous vampire-slayer extraordinaire? The Dutch doctor (with a strong German accent – no explanation for this is given) speaks broken English interspersed with occasional German interjections like "Mein Gott!" and "Gott in Himmel". His English syntax is far from being that of a native speaker, as is clear from his little apologue

The good husbandman tell you so then because he knows, but not till then. But you do not see the good husbandman dig up his planted corn to see if he grow; that is for the children. (1897, p. 166)

The German exclamations, the erroneous 3rd-person singular and subject pronouns, the mis-use of the definite article, all disappear in Italian, in not only the first but also most of the successive translations of the famous Gothic tale. Quite simply, incorrect English was not allowed to become incorrect Italian and foreign words, as a matter of editorial principle, were eliminated on sight.

This practice was not surprising or unpredictable during fascism. What is surprising perhaps is that it was not restricted to that particular period in Italian history. As late as the mid-1960s, translators, or rather publishers, were still covering up the flaws – what were seen as flaws – of what they were translating and publishing from the English. Perhaps the most glaring example of this policy in the second half of the 20th century was Vincenzo Abrate's translation of John Fowles' "The Collector" (1963), a little masterpiece of stylistic variation on the part of an author who was yet to write his major work "The French Lieutenant's Woman" and who was later claimed by many to be the greatest English novelist since Lawrence.

Very simply, the story of *The Collector* is: young working-class man becomes obsessed with upper-middle class woman whom he kidnaps and keeps in his cellar hoping that she will learn to love him, with tragic consequences. The style of the novel is of paramount importance, as both protagonists narrate the story from their own points of view, using their own



idiolects. Clearly, the idiolect of the man is marked by down-to-earth workingclass English, whereas the girl's is standard "Queen's English" or received pronunciation, tending towards the posh and pretentious language of a 1960s' art student. The novel was an immediate best seller in Britain, with the Italian translation published by Rizzoli, coming out just before the film starring Terence Stamp had its debut in 1965.

Vincenzo Abrate's *Il collezionista* (1964) succeeds perfectly well in telling the same story as Fowles' *Collector*. What he fails to do, probably by design rather than by accident, is convey the style and idiolect of the young working-class boy. The language in the original is marked with a whole series of syntactic imperfections going from the misuse of the genitive, adjectives instead of adverbs, to horrible-sounding double negatives, almost all of which are corrected in Italian for fear of impoverishing *il bello scrivere italiano*:

She didn't hardly object (p. 59) Non sollevò obiezioni

I didn't give no more than a quick look (p. 109) Non le detti che un rapido sguardo.

There is just one exception when the English grammar mistake is kept in Italian, but only because there was no way that the translator could correct it contextually:

He: You had to think very careful about what you said.

She: Carefully.

He: I mean carefully (p. 195).

Bisognava star sempre molto attento a quel che si dice.

Molto attenti. Va bene. Attenti.

Having said that, though, the passive Italian structure used just is not the way a young Italian would express himself, grammar mistake or no grammar mistake. It is all about how Italian should be written, as opposed to using the written form to show how people actually speak.

After such a possibly confusing historical survey of the battle between words and meaning, what conclusions may be drawn? It may even seem from everything that has been said above that just about anything goes. A word or two, however, must be said in defence of the translator. The job of the translator is not at all dissimilar to that of architects. Their work too is commissioned by someone else who pays them, their work also reflects the tastes of the times and they too are the ones who bear the brunt of criticisms made by later generations with different tastes about what they have done to the skyline.



Translators also have to answer to someone who has a say in what they produce, not infrequently a strong say whenever it is a question of being published or not, of being paid or not. Nine times out of ten, those who commission works of translation are less interested in the needs of the producer, but much more in what the customer wants, what the customer will buy. Here, to show to what extent an original may be altered and even distorted to suit the tastes of the customers, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* should be mentioned again.

Bram Stoker, who died one hundred years ago and whose centenary has recently been celebrated in literary circles all over the world, would be turning in his grave (no pun intended) if he could see his Dracula and his Van Helsing today. Dracula has become a blue-eyed blond hunk aka Richard Roxburgh, known for his *baddie* roles in films such as Mission Impossible. Dear old Professor Van Helsing has become superhunk Hugh Jackman of Wolverine fame and sweet Lucy has turned into leather-clad superbabe Kate Beckinsale. All of them are armed with crossbows that can fire six arrows simultaneously, the arrows are made of silver, of course, and they are all blackbelted 7th Dan, Kung Fu experts. Of course, the young thoroughly enjoy an opportunity like this to see their superstar heart-throbs, while the older generation grumpily scoff at the poor quality of the film, oddly grieving the loss of Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing whose films were, in all honesty, not much better.

What has all this to do with translation and translators? Well, film adaptation is just an extreme form of translation. And the point is that after a quick glance at IMDB, you will realise that, even though the film Van Helsing cost a whopping \$150 million to make (expensive films can still be bad!), it managed to net over \$300 million before even counting DVD sales. Film adaptors and translators work so that studios and publishers make money. You give your audiences and your readership what they want in accordance with the tastes of the day. If good Italian is the trend of the day, then it should come as no surprise that poor style and grammar mistakes be eliminated in the transfer over from English. If your society is closed to foreign culture and literature, little wonder is it then that the translations exclusively follow the tenets of the target language culture.

In the end, it is all about what your aim is when you provide a certain type of translation, what your "skopos" is, to use the term applied to translation by Hans Vermeer (1989, pp. 173-87). In other words, whether you wish to produce a completely different poem, novel or film - along the lines of George Macbeth's poetry or Van Helsing The Movie or whether you wish to provide a crib for school children or university students to help them pass their exams, especially older texts like Dante, Homer, Virgil and many others. That is what *skopos* theory is all about. Translation approach depends on what you want to do, what your aim is, what your publisher and indeed your readership expects of you.



In actual fact, the translator's freedom of choice is pre-determined by the tastes and trends of the moment and as such the translation becomes a socialhistorical document that also speaks volumes about the target culture in which it is written, what people thought, how they behaved, what people's likes and dislikes were, how they expressed themselves, how they prefer super silver crossbow arrows to wooden stakes and Kung Fu to boxing. Or how they prefer bloodhounds to mongrels, or women to insects. If you like, the original is a static work of art, fixed in time, though of universal appeal. Your translation or rather translations of that work, on the other hand, are dynamic, everchanging, interpretative and re-interpretative, ephemeral and only rarely of universal appeal. That is why, for example, there is one new translation of Dante's *Inferno* produced in English every two and a half years, that is why the Bible goes on being translated year after year. This of course is good news for translators. Every new age, or generation, with its new tastes and language, will need its new translation. Literary translators may be paid badly, but they will never be out of work. So in the end, approach is less important than quality. What really matters is not whether it is form-oriented or content-oriented, but whether it is a good translation or a bad one.

Bionote: Professor John Dodds began his academic career at the University of Cairo in 1976, after which he moved to Italy in 1979 where he became a language assistant for the English Department of the University of Udine. A few years later he moved to the University of Trieste where, in 1994, he became Dean of the Interpreters' School. He has also been Director of the Language Centre and founding President of the EUT, Trieste's university press. Prof Dodds has published extensively in English and in Italian on a variety of aspects of comparative linguistics and translation theory. His books on the analysis and translation of literary and poetic texts, especially the translation of Dante Alighieri, indicate his main research interests. His most recent book, entitled *Italian Translation Itineraries* (2012), is an in-depth guide on translating literary and non-literary texts in a classroom environment. Prof. Dodds is also on several advisory boards of international reviews, such as *ESP Across Cultures* and *Rivista Internazionale di Tecnica della Traduzione*.



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