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BETWEEN LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

TRANSLATION AND CROSS-CULTURAL TEXTS

*Anuradha Dingwaney and
Carol Maier, Editors*

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On the Virtues of Not Understanding

James Boyd White

Because every attempt distorts the original, perfect translation is impossible. Is it the task of the translator to make this impossibility seem to disappear, to produce a text that flows effortlessly in the new language, presenting no problems of understanding, or should the translator somehow find a way to bring the reader to share a sense of the foreignness of what he is reading, and hence this much of the reality of the unknown text, its language, and its world? Several of the authors in this volume raise this issue one way or another, especially Indira Karamcheti, who argues for the virtues of “opaque translation,” a translation with “cognitive holes.” And I myself have made a similar argument:

To translate at all requires that one learn the language of another, recognize the inadequacy of one’s own language to that reality, yet make a text, nonetheless, in response to it. Should it accordingly be a constant and central aim of the translator to bring his own reader to a new consciousness of the limits of his language in relation to another? Not by changing English, say, into some foreign thing, but far more subtly, by reminding the reader that one is always at the edge of what can be done; that beyond it is something unknown and if only for that reason wonderful; that, like a grammar, a translation can be only a partial substitute for an education (White 252–53).

To do otherwise, to create a seemingly effortless text, would be to erase the reality of the other language—the possibilities for life and feeling it offers, the experiences of those who live on its terms—which would be an ethical as well as an aesthetic wrong, a violation of the translator’s duty of fidelity to the original. This is especially so where speakers of the

other language are politically subordinate to those to whom the translation is addressed. (There may be a greater obligation to recognize the reality and validity of “Third World” languages in an English translation than to recognize the value of English when one is translating the other way.) The issue can be seen in even more general terms, as another instance in which it is valuable to be conscious of one’s language and its limits.

But there is something to be said on the other side too. I think of John Gardner’s claim that the heart of fiction writing (and he could have included writing of other kinds as well) is the creation of a “vivid and continuous dream” in the reader’s mind: “One of the chief mistakes a writer makes is to allow or force the reader’s mind to be distracted, even momentarily, from the fictional dream” (Gardner 31–32). If the text we are translating has this quality, as of course many great ones do—think of the *Odyssey*, for example—are we not unfaithful to it in an important, indeed essential, way if our translation lacks it? If the text does anything it creates a world in which one can for the moment believe, and should the translator not aim at that too? Fidelity to the original requires no less.

It is the tension between these views that I wish to address here, with the idea not so much of resolving it as complicating it, by suggesting a way to think about it somewhat more fully.

My first point is that this is an issue not only in translating between languages, but in translating from one dialect or discourse within a language into another, indeed in every act of reading or listening. To take an especially clear example, think of translation in the law: the story of the client is translated into the discourse of the law, the authoritative texts of the law are translated into the new context that is provided by the client’s story, and both processes are full of imperfection. This becomes especially clear in a lawsuit, for both processes are explicitly contested. The lawyers for the two parties argue for different versions of the key events in legal discourse and for different versions of that discourse itself. How far should the speakers acknowledge the fact that the law results in the choice of one story, in one language, over another, which is erased? One function of the judicial dissent, so important in the rhetoric of appellate decisions, is to make just this acknowledgment; but should something like this happen elsewhere in the process? When and how should legal speakers recognize the limits of their own discourse? This

question, which is obviously political and ethical, is also a question about the virtues of opacity or transparency in translation.¹

But it is not only in such interdialectical translations but in the rest of life, in the reading of virtually every human utterance, that the texts we make about other texts represent them imperfectly. Everything we read has opacities as well as transparencies, as do all of our own expressions. Dealing with this fact is a part of ordinary human competence. Think of the way a child learns the language in which she is raised, for example, by repeating sounds and gestures. She may be confident of her capacity to do this without understanding very much of what the words “mean” to the grown-up she is imitating or responding to. But that is all right, for her capacity is usually sufficient to her needs, and she can be confident in the rightness of her own gestures in the context in which she makes them. But sometimes the degree of not understanding, or of not being able to speak confidently, becomes overwhelming, and this creates a painful lacuna she must try hard to fill.

With this imagined experience of a child, compare your own reading of Chaucer or Shakespeare. You read right along, wholly engaged, even though if someone asked you to do it, you would be hard pressed to explain this particular word or that phrase; but somehow you get enough sense of its function and its flavor to enable you to go on. If the text is important to you, you may go back, focusing on the moments of not understanding, and then you are likely to realize that there is more to understand about the meaning of the words and phrases than you could ever master. We can never understand completely; what is more, our sense of incompleteness is itself a spur to investigation, learning, invention. I am here reminded of the remark of bell hooks in her essay for this volume, that she tries to get her students to see “not understanding as a space for learning.”

Let me give one more example, a sentence I am sure every one of us in some sense will understand just fine: “I’ll bet you never went there.” But that is a sentence abstracted from any real context, and what we “understand” is also rather abstract. Imagine, for example, reading it with the emphasis on the “I”: what social circumstances would produce that intonation? (Answering this question, for example: “Will nobody bet that I never went there?”) Go through the whole sentence, emphasizing each word in turn, and see how the sentence changes meaning as it is variously pronounced to suggest a range of contexts in which it works as a gesture. Or imagine it spoken by different voices: by a grandchild to a grandfather,

or a grandmother; a taxi-driver (male or female) to a passenger (male or female); a soldier to a civilian, or vice versa; one ten-year-old boy to another, and so on. The sentence shifts tone and emphasis with each imagining, yet these are all still incomplete: exactly what grandchild to what grandfather? My colleague the linguist A. L. Becker has often made this assignment to students: go out into the world and listen until you overhear a sentence that strikes you; write it down; now observe or recall as much of the context as you can, in as great detail as possible, and record that too; finally explain how this specification of context gives meaning to the sentence you have written.

While in one sense we all “understand” the sentence, “I’ll bet you never went there,” in another sense we do not. Our understanding—unknown to ourselves—is full of empty spaces or “cognitive holes” and “ignorance.”² It is part of Becker’s achievement to suggest a way in which these aspects of not understanding can be made visible to us and hence the occasion for learning. More generally, one of the great virtues of asking students to translate in the classroom, or to read translations with an eye to the original, is that the opacities are more easily seen, the need for learning more obvious. And what needs to be learned is not a set of politically proper pieties, about diversity or difference, but the actual language of another person.

As a contrast with these opacities, think of what you would regard as the most nonproblematic speech of all, the most completely understood: what would it be? A set of stereotyped clichés, a ritual of verbal gestures? (see Coles 134). At the end of the spectrum that approximates complete transparency, I think one finds no life at all, but a kind of death of mind and self.

This is the way of saying that there are opacities in all our speech, all our reading, and that part of one’s competence at life includes managing this fact. Translation, then, is not a unique practice, but one case of a more general phenomenon, and one we already know something about, whether we are aware of that knowledge or not.

One can learn to see “not understanding” as a “space for learning,” I think, in part because some of the texts we read and hear invite us to do just that, and in ways that prove valuable. Or, to put it slightly differently, one way to evaluate texts is by asking how productive their opacities and uncertainties are. Here, for example, is the opening sentence of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*: “About thirty years ago, Miss Maria

Ward of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of a handsome house and a large income."

In one sense this is perfectly accessible, though on reflection one will realize that one may not exactly know what a "baronet" is, or how much "seven thousand pounds" should be thought to be, or what the "comforts and consequences" of the position are, or with what deprivations they are to be compared. The novel will indeed give meaning to each of these terms. But this is not the major opacity of the sentence: the real question is how we are to regard this voice, so officious and mercenary, which can speak so coldly of "good luck" and "captivating." This will in fact be a major problem of the novel, for its heroine, Fanny, grows up in a world in which almost everybody speaks in one or another version of this voice, against which she must find her own way of talking; this defines a problem for the reader too, who must struggle in his own way with these various speakers, starting with this one. In this way, the difficulty of the opening sentence is made productive of thought and life by the rest of the novel of which it is a part. But that is by no means necessary: one could imagine a novel continuing in the same voice without a break, or one in which it was made the object of crude or heavy-handed irony.

One way to think of reading a book like this is that one learns its language: the ways in which one gesture plays off against another, perhaps freshly defining both; the ways in which its central terms are given meaning by particular uses in particular contexts; the ways in which its central tensions are accordingly defined and perhaps resolved. Think of the way Emily Dickinson gives meaning to central terms like *noon* and *circumference*, for example, across the range of her poems. Reading as learning a language, then, just what the translator must do as the first stage of her work.

What all this means about translation is that it cannot be wholly transparent—the idea of a continuous dream is itself a dream—and that it cannot be wholly opaque, if the translation makes any effort to speak the language of its audience at all. It is important to ask not where it lies on this spectrum, as if that were a test of value, but rather what it does with its opacities and clarities, that is, whether it makes them productive or not. The translator can focus mainly on what is problematic in the original work—for example, the manliness of Odysseus, implied in the

very first work of the *Odyssey* (*andra*) as a term of praise; yet this hero ends up dependent upon a boy, a swineherd, and a woman for his success—or mainly on what is problematic in the interaction between the two languages, in the act of translation itself. She cannot do one to the exclusion of the other: the continuous dream is impossible, and at the other extreme there is only a language lesson. Instead, she must find her own mix of emphasis, the one she thinks right for this text or genre, in the situation in which she is working. She may try for consistency in this respect, or may choose to alternate between moments of transparency and moments of opacity. The range of her possibilities cannot be defined ahead of time, for she is engaged in creative art; but the performance can be judged afterwards, by asking how well it invites its reader to make its moments of “not understanding,” of both kinds, into “spaces for learning.”

Notes

1. What of the fact that translations in the law are mandatory, exercises of official power, in this sense acts of domination? Since they are contested, they also are to some degree open to dispute; and in many cases the act of translation gives power to those who should have it. The furniture store cheats you; the law provides a place to tell that story, and a language in which to do so, that may give you the power to get your money back. The fact that the law naturally reflects power distributions in our world, and in ways that make it in some respects systematically unfair, should not obscure two other things: that many of those who have unfair power through the law would have much, much more without it; and that our law itself is meant to be fair, including, and sometimes especially, to the powerless. It is neither to be rejected as polluted, nor revered as flawless, but subjected to intelligent scrutiny, judgment, and change.

2. Our false sense that we do “understand” such a sentence, abstracted from any context, is itself the product, I think, of a false image of language, one that reduces meaning to structural relations among semantic units.

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