

Translation in a Globalised World

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Nowadays, in a global context, change is an irritating vogue word, as well as apparently a more conspicuous fact than it has ever been before. Public figures are so obsessed by delivering change, that they regard this as their only purpose, their only criterion, and their only frame of reference. A prominent translation scholar, Mona Baker, has suggested (informal communication) that any book on translation studies is out of date three years after its publication; I would suggest that any book of any kind that is out of date three years after its publication is not worth reading, and should never have been written, let alone published. And I suggest that whilst many things do not change fast enough, the most important things, like artistic truth - in Giotto, in Rembrandt, in Goya, in the face of a doctor in a 6th Century sculpture in Rhodes - do not change at all.

The object of this paper is to consider to what extent globalisation changes the essence and the modes of translation.

Globalisation, which is a complex term, may be defined as the process enabling financial and investment markets to operate internationally, largely as a result of deregulation and continuously improved and intensified communication. Further, globalisation is often identified with the World Trade Organization (the WTO), an international body concerned with promoting and regulating trade on a world scale between its member states. It was established in 1995 as a successor to GATT, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, a treaty, inspired by the great Keynes and signed fifty years earlier to promote trade by reducing or eliminating tariffs and import quotas. WTO conferences were protested in the name of antiglobalisation at Seattle, Kyoto and Genoa. Globalisation, internationally, has either a positive or a negative sense, which in each case is not far removed from the way capitalism used to be described. Historically it has been, positively, a uniquely powerful means of wealth creation; negatively, however, it is a means of hierarchisation, of promoting huge disparities in wealth, leading to various culture-bound linguistic descriptions such as: *affluent, wealthy, the well to do, the haves, the well-off, aise, riche, reich, wohlhabend, vermögend, begütert*. These descriptions are further defined, in connoting goodness as opposed to badness, by their contextual tone, which in translation has to be assessed by a common criterion.

Globalisation tends to be identified either with multinationals and world-wide distribution of wealth, or with huge disparities of incomes. Moreover, when one turns to particulars, it is associated with genetically modified food, in contrast with organic food; with the rapid growth of international trade in finished goods and services; with the extension of free international markets that flow across borders; and with the slow convergence of consumer tastes in all countries. Freedoms are positive qualities, but they are also associated with 'the weak to the wall' and 'the devil takes the hindmost' (Arthur Hugh Clough).

Symbolically, globalisation is associated with the Holocaust and with the 11th September Twin Tower catastrophe, both of which successively promoted two immense dualisms: democracy and racism; the West and the desperate.

Critics of globalisation theory, on the other hand, argue that in an increasingly globalised world, characterized by historically exceptional degrees of economic and social interdependence at all levels and ranks from the personal to the international, vast and continuous migrations from Fourth World countries seek either political asylum or a higher economic standard of living in 'the West'; but they refuse any linguistic, cultural and religious assimilation in their new homes, and reject communication and the assistance that for instance translation can offer; therefore globalisation

leads to tensions, riots and terrorism which is the deliberate murder of innocent civilians. (Note that the EU constantly wrestles with the costs of translation; this is peanuts compared to the cost of mass foreign language education, which must come).

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The essence of translation is completely unaffected by globalisation, but since globalisation's instrument is the promotion of increasingly rapid and never flagging technological change, the modes and channels of translation do thereby multiply, change, and indeed sometimes disappear. Thus, we have various types of Machine Translation, the varieties of translation methods and memories found in the internet, as well as surtitling, sub-titling, and dubbing, not to mention all the translation microgadgets so frequently on the market.

Take a simple example, surtitling, i.e., the screened translation of librettos, scores and foreign play texts usually positioned above or along side the stage (which could be more appropriately called 'supertitling' (*Übertiteln*)). In the United Kingdom surtitles only appeared about twenty years ago, despite misguided opposition, which suggested that the translations would divert attention from the music. But surtitles - no one says a word against them now - thrive increasingly in opera-houses, even monolingually in English for the choruses in Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd*, the words of which are indistinguishable without the help of surtitles.

3

Translation is a series of mental thought processes, deliberated or intuitive, and it does not change. Most people know intuitively what translation is, but it is difficult to define or to delimit it. Whilst its aim is to transfer the meaning of a text from one language to another for a similar or different kind of readership as accurately as possible, its success as a full restatement of meaning is usually only approximate. The reproduction of the meaning of any word, particularly a mental rather than a concrete word, say *virtue* translated by *Tugend*, let alone of any sentence, say, *She is domiciled in Brighton*, *Sie ist in Brighton wohnhaft*, (which is less formal), is partially dependent on frequency of use; nevertheless, translation is always (more, or less) possible, and the translation of at least the message that is the core of meaning should always be entirely successful. Centrally, a thorough translation attempts to account for and replace each unit of meaning (that is, each morpheme, i.e., each monosyllable, root or affix), which may be lexical (say, *home*) or each cultural/encyclopaedic segment (say, *Yorkshire pudding*) in the original text, provided the unit is considered to be of consequence. When these units are of little consequence, they are likely to be eliminated or combined in the translation. Cultural or lexical units that have no obvious equivalents in the target language, but are considered important, have to be functionally/descriptively expanded in the translation. (e.g., *Yorkshire pudding* has to be explained, say as *Teig=Beilage zu Rinderbraten*). Thus, to some extent all translations are over- or undertranslations; the more significant the language of the original, the more closely each segment has to be translated.

There is a range of types of translation, to be distinguished by their length on a descending scale: explicitations or prolonged glosses or, to use House's term, a "covert translation", that has passed through a "linguistic and cultural filter" (cf. House 1997); paraphrase; synonymy; overtranslation; close translation; undertranslation; summary; résumé; précis; synopsis; abstract; gist; snippet. Which translation type is selected is often influenced by globalisation, or more precisely by the technology to hand, and the circumstance of the translation. This is not surprising in view of today's monstrous disgorging of paper, keeping all the computers turning the wheels of so-called information technology. For a brilliant sharp reaction, I quote Shakespeare's:

Grates me! The sum? (*Sekkiert mich! Die Summe?*)
(Mark Antony, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.1.28).

Both journalism and translation have evolved such numerous forms and formats of condensation. Thus, *The Guardian*, which like all other papers has wearisomely grown enormously in the last ten years or so, now prints *The Editor*, which is itself a compendium of types of inter- or translinguistic contraction, including gradually decreasing summaries of the same article. Padding, the statement of the obvious, consciously or unconsciously used to expand a text (since the translator is paid by the word) deadens and benumbs the world's print, like a stale intensifier. Padding, trailed by the almost inevitable 'of course' ('*Of course it is well-known that ...*') rather than cliché and jargon, let alone eurofog and gobbledegook, is the root of all bad writing, and dominates modern information production; condensation is often the translator's only sensible reaction, though as a freelance she loses money thereby.

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So far, the only officially agreed international statement about the nature and implications of translation has been the *Translator's Charter* produced by the International Federation of Translators under the auspices of UNESCO and signed at Nairobi in 1976. It states:

Every translation shall be faithful and render exactly the idea and form of the original [...] A faithful translation, however, should not be confused with a literal translation, since the fidelity of a translation does not exclude an adaptation to make the form, the atmosphere and the deeper meaning of the work felt in another language and country [...] The translator should in particular be a master [stylistically or linguistically?] of the language into which he translates.

Clearly this Charter requires revision, though it is remarkable for errors of omission rather than commission. It simply ignores values, the essential factors such as the seriousness, the importance, the authority, the factual truth, the standard of writing (except perhaps indirectly), the moral purpose, and the logical coherence of the original text, which the translator has to consider, especially if one or the other of these factors is deficient. It preserves the traditional idea of a translation as desirably the mirror-image of the original in another language, in either another culture or in a universal world. Above all it makes no distinction between, on the one hand, literary translation, the worlds of allegory and fantasy, and, on the other, non-literary translation, the worlds of reality, and, indeed, of the study of reality, the later humane sciences such as sociology, art history and psychology.

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I would summarize the components of translation that resist globalisation, that fundamentally do not change, as follows:

The essence of translation is the transference of the full meaning of a text from one language to another, with a putative readership in mind, in as far as this is possible. The essence of the translation process - which is a universal, but which is not usually acknowledged as such - is that the more serious and important the language (i.e., the words and their order) of the original text, the more closely it must be translated; the less serious the language, the less closely it need be translated. I define serious as 'weighty or momentous in its consequences', involving ultimately matters of life and death, as Graham Greene once wrote.

In order not to mislead readers, let me say that these two correlations have to be modified by five stable medial non-cultural factors:

- (1) The facts stated in a non-literary text must not be at variance with reality. Only in a literary text, as in Kafka's *Amerika*, can the Statue of Liberty brandish a symbolical sword.
- (2) The text must respect the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in particular the equality of women and men, and must express the consequent linguistic effects. Thus, sexist language should be desexed, except in historical texts such as the 1789 Rights of Man document. The translator has to treat linguistically ingrained marks of prejudice sensitively.
- (3) A non-literary text should be elegantly written, bearing in mind the norms, as closely as is reasonable, of clarity, simplicity, brevity and harmony; a serious literary text should pursue the literary style of the original, making creative deviations where the target language cannot normally cope. The briefer the translation in respect of the original, the more forceful will be its pragmatic effect.

A distinction has to be made between writing well, and having a comprehensive knowledge of a language; the two have little to do with one other. Thus, commenting on Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, the book so trenchantly criticised in House (1997: pp. 147, 155), Clive James castigates its execrable 'natural' style, quoting:

It is necessary to eschew explanations that in a reductionist fashion attribute complex and highly variable actions to structural factors or allegedly universalistic social psychological processes; the task, then is to specify what combinations of factors brought the perpetrators, whatever their identities were, to contribute to the Holocaust in all the ways they did. (James 2002: 237)

(Note that this gobbledegook is in fact an original, not a translation. All gobbledegook, which consists mainly of grecolatinisms and padding, in fact usually sounds like translation from American English.) A translator has to discriminate between clumsy use of language, which can be improved, and cases where the style of the text is an essential trait of its obscurity, as in the Goldhagen quotation.

- (4) The logic, particularly of time and causality, of the source text has to be preserved.
- (5) The linguistic lacunae of the target language text should be supplemented one way or another, e.g., by the literal translation of a non-cultural source language idiom, say, 'to drain the abscess' for 'to resolve the crisis' (*vider l'abces*), given the apparently infinite resources of the thinking mind.

These factors may be taken into account extratextually, through the resource of a preface, an afterword, an insertion within square brackets marked by a 'sic' and/or '-Tr.', a glossary or footnotes at the end of page, chapter or text. When any of these are added, after mature consideration, they become an essential part of the translation.

Paradoxically, whilst the bases of translation do not change, the translator's endeavour as a writer is constantly to renew her language, to expand its infinitely recursive means, to creatively compensate for its amazing gaps - how can any language get on without a policy distinguished from politics? - and so to change. The surface of a translation can change at any time, with time, in time. The translator with his two hands is throwing up half a dozen skittles, constantly seeking a balance of equivalence, continuously making throws that only partly compensate each other. The game has to finish some time, yet the translation is never finished. This does not change.

References

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