

Distinguishing Text Analysis and Translation: Overcoming the Security Barrier

Paul Mirabile

mirabile_paul@hotmail.fr

Abstract

Translating texts and the grammatical or literary analysis of texts adhere to distinct methodical pedagogies and very different psychological approaches. Translation requires thinking in and with the two languages translated, whereas text analysis necessitates thinking in and within the one language of the text. Continual translation of texts during grammatical or literary analysis erects a psychological and linguistic security barrier between the mother tongue and the foreign language studied which prevents the thinking in and with the foreign language. The methods of text analysis aim at decoding or interpreting the text with the use of synonym and antonym exercises, the application of syntax deconstruction and morphological formation, with aspect, tense and mood verbal phrases, with etymological research, tropes and figures of speech, with the comparing of different discourses through the study of learned words and common words, jargon and slang. Translation and literary analysis should be taught as parallel subjects the very first year of university with the same texts or easy-to-read books in order to show students how both apply different methodical terminologies, and how they require contrasted psychological approaches. Their parallel study is the first step towards bilingualism, and consequently biculturalism since it demarcates clearly the two disciplines, and at the same time, obliges students to reconsider his or her mother tongue in relation to the foreign language in question. For to learn a foreign language has no negative bearing or impact on one's mother tongue; on the contrary, they are mutually enriched.

Keywords: biculturalism, creative ease, literary pleasure, security barrier, translation

In Chinese universities much misunderstanding between translation of texts and analysis of texts has been observed, and this to such a degree that the first not only dominates the second but renders the second practically useless. For text analysis implies thinking in the target language, whereas the translation of texts depends largely on the mother tongue for linguistic, cultural and stylistic support. The utter indifference towards text analysis is not just a pedagogical ignorance, but eschews -either consciously or unconsciously- an undermining of its linguistic and cultural purport. This confusion, and the indifference that sustains it, appears to mark a strategy of maintaining Chinese students within the frontiers of their own mental linguistic and culture environment lest the study of text analysis or of foreign literature on the whole prevent them from thinking in a language other than *through* Chinese; to reason by other means than what they have been taught to reason during their Middle and High school years. To translate every phrase read in a classroom, every phrasal unit or locution, every idiomatic expression into Chinese at almost every level of university when learning a foreign language assures the professor that his or her students are learning that particular language through the prism of Chinese thought patterns.³⁰ This 'method' relativises all the foreign languages that are learnt, essentialises them into a block of 'Western (or Eastern) languages', all similar because all 'heard and viewed' through the eyes of a Chinese linguistic grid and cultural prism.

This Chinese prism and/or grid erects a *security barrier* for both the Chinese professor and students, one that can be relied on and constantly referred to whenever the foreign language becomes overtly imposing during

30 These classes could be grammar, tourism, commerce or literature.

the apprenticeship. In other words, when foreign professors oblige, at times aggressively, to use only the target language during apprenticeship.³¹

To translate does not signify to understand. Chinese students learning a foreign language in their first and second years learn very quickly if the target language be preponderate orally and visually in classrooms. They grasp the basics without having to fall back on their mother tongue unless it be for reasons other than pedagogical.³² Young people learn languages easily and quickly; they need not be indulged or cosseted. It is a question of delimited linguistic territories. These territories shall be discussed shortly.

For now, however, it appears that the Chinese conception of 'sound understanding' is to have each and every sentence translated into Chinese from their manuals, although those sentences have been perfectly understood by the majority of the students when read, heard or written in their original forms. It was as if translating ensured the students a more perfect comprehension. As if only by translating will a student fully grasp the target language. But in fact, he or she doesn't. It only certifies to the professor that the Chinese language (and its culture?) will not be 'seconded' by the target language, will not be 'dominated' or 'excluded' during the act of apprenticeship. It was as if the foreign tongue acted as an existential threat that must be accommodated to an image created through Chinese standards so as not to loom too large in the eyes of students; to be learnt, indeed, yet not have this learning imbue their minds and spirits. Hence, to be learnt

31 This obligation does not include first and second year students who have no or little knowledge of the target language being taught. It is, however, quite different for first and second year students of the English Department since they have had English in Middle and High School.

32 For example, particular problems outside the classroom for which a sound knowledge of their mother tongue is indispensable. In these cases Chinese counselors or mentors are called upon.

mechanically, like automats, leaving ample space for the mother tongue to override attempts by the target language to breach the stoic security barrier. In short, Chinese, and the Chinese language must be ubiquitous, must always have the last word in whatever pedagogical situation that may arise.

The result is that the majority of Chinese students 'translate' foreign languages in the Chinese manner of speaking, reading and writing because they hardly make an effort to think in it. Many students do not read; they decipher through Chinese, and when they are asked to proceed to a simple analysis of what they have read, they begin to translate. They panic at unknown words in the sentence, look helplessly about for psychological support from their classmates, stubbornly resist to comprehend globally the sentences they read either from a book or off the projector screen. They do not attempt to *look at* the word they are reading; to uncover its possible meaning by morphological cutting in order to define the function of prefixes or suffixes, or locate the root lexeme of the word. Dictionaries are permitted in classes; however, when unknown words occur the students immediately search for the definition in the dictionary (electronic or paper-bound), choosing the first definition of the word in question disregardless of its narrative context. Oftentimes their semantic choice proves nonsensical because the defined word, albeit analogous to its Chinese equivalent, has absolutely no meaning within the context of the story-line. Because the students make no real effort to integrate the target language within their psychological framework, since they have continual recourse to Chinese, reading a relatively simple text never goes beyond the deciphering stage of it. Integration or assimilation of the target language should begin the very first years of apprenticeship if a proper bilingual and bicultural programme has been thoroughly and intelligently organised.

This programme entails a division of territories. The manner in which young children assimilate languages by or through distinctive delimited territories is akin to the way a Chinese student should integrate or assimilate better the target tongue, if translation and text analysis have been delimited territorially. By territories is meant a specific, affective, accommodating space : For example, in the case at hand, a scheduled day and period for translation and a scheduled day and period for text analysis, however, using of the same simplified or Easy-To-Read English (or other language) books.³³ If a young person can assimilate up to four or five languages -provided that the linguistic territories are delimited-, the university student will assimilate one (or two) language(s) provided that translation and text analysis have been properly delimited.

This delimitation does not necessarily mean that translation and text analysis be taught by different professors; the same professor, if capable of doing so, can readily teach both, if of course properly trained. In the same way, the Easy-To-Read book should be the same in the translation and the text analysis classes. For it is not the subject or pedagogical material that is at stake in the integrating or assimilating process, but the distinctive methods of putting it or them to practice.

Composition work proves even more painstaking for both the students and the foreign professor, given the fact that the target language can hardly be calqued from the Chinese without it slipping into incomprehensible metaphrasic renderings. Only constant reading of the target language, day and night, and assiduous composition exercises will offer

33 See the Bibliography for a few examples of the Simplified or Easy-To-Read books for Chinese students.

students the linguistic and narrative possibilities to overcome the security barrier of their own language. If a student is not given the opportunities to begin thinking in the target language, he or she will hardly be able to read it globally, much less write in it. If a student's thinking patterns and reasoning do not react to the target language's own rhythmic and melodious patterns, then reading will remain deciphering, and writing, a pathetic attempt at a word for word rendering without any narrative thread or semantic meaning of that thread. Many third- and fourth-year students in fact read texts aloud without understanding them since they are so accustomed to translate them word for word. The important spontaneous seizing of meaning plays absolutely no role in reading stories or poetry because the students have not been exposed to the efforts of seizing a language without the crutch of their mother tongue, or the constant falling back on it. They are not permitted to react 'emotionally' (aggressively, passively, enthusiastically, joyfully, painfully) to the forms and syntax of the target language because they have never been taught to treat translation and text analysis as different disciplines, as separated forms of linguistic expression. And without spontaneity text analysis, be it prose or poetry, becomes a boring onus for both students and professors.

It goes without saying that without proper pedagogical strategies, and the terminology that enhances and sustains them,³⁴ analysing literary texts in class is limited to narrow and mechanically orientated translation exercises. Sentences are not interpreted as they are written, but as they are

34 For example, analepse (flash-back), prolepse (anticipation), embedding (mise en abîme); rhetorical terms such as metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, pleonasm, simile, litotes, etc., or in poetry: end-rhyme schemes (AABB or heroic couplets, ABAB (cross-rhyme), ABBA), inlaid-rhyme, blank verse, sonnets, odes, ottava rima, verse, stanza, etc.

translated in order to be re-interpreted through the mental patterns of Chinese rhythmic structures, hence Chinese criteria or visions of the world. Interpreting texts, narratologically or philologically however, signifies sounding out their own structures, forms and rhythmic patterns, their own *raison d'être*. So, by the time the students reach their third and fourth year of studies, the majority have absolutely no idea 'how' to comprehend a foreign language other than through a framed Chinese picture of it. Parts of speech, tropes and other grammatical or narratological terminology (syntax, morphology, phonemes, nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, vowels, consonants, story-line, parallel plots, etc.) belonging to the target languages have been translated into Chinese. Furthermore, Chinese professors never use these terms in class, hence, foreign professors are at loggerheads as how to make their students grasp differences between form and function, how to develop or comment on texts since the terminology associated to the texts has never been taught to the students. In short, in order to be understood, the foreign professor is obliged to teach the third- or fourth-year students the grammatical, linguistic and narratological jargon of the language their students have been learning for two full years since all the explanations have been translated into Chinese, orally or in written form.

Only the few perspicacious or very motivated students overcome the security barrier, and have instinctively developed their own strategies of alternating between the mother and target languages, equitably. They have established a criterium of apprenticeship which does not imply rivalry between the two languages nor the infringement or encroachment of one on the other. To learn a foreign language signifies *immersion* into it; it does not

signify ontic *absorption* and hence the detriments of the mother tongue.³⁵ Indeed, the alternating immersion within each builds a solid foundation which paves the way to bilingualism, and consequently to biculturalism. Both the mother and the target tongues are treated as two equal alternating forces to be either compared judiciously; that is, equivalent forms and structures are subject to interesting analogical debates, or deliberately delineated so as one does not linguistically or culturally prevail over the other. It is a question of balance and of poise. It is especially a question of the love of languages and not just the patriotic or neurotic obsession of one's mother tongue.³⁶

Many Chinese educators truly believe that setting a Chinese framework onto the target language as a method of apprenticeship will lead students to bilingualism. This belief only materializes when the perspicacious student has founded strategies of overcoming the security barrier.

To compare grammatical structures and rhetorical expressions, to collate idiomatic locutions and word-families are marvelous translating exercises to be practised in translating classes. These exercises should not be confused with text analysis courses which should be affected through the medium of the language of the text, the methods or strategies spawned from

35 Read Henri Mechonnic's works on the problematic of translation and self- or national-identity. See Bibliography.

36 A short article in the *China Daily* written by a Chinese educator upbraids those Chinese educators who emphasize the importance of learning English in Middle and High Schools, arguing that Chinese pupils and students who spend too much time studying English neglect their own language, and consequently their Chinese identity ! This type of argument -which is not uncommon- is of course untenable: it were as if a human being had only one identity, whereas in fact everyone of us has the existential possibility to embody several identities, and whose means of verbal expression are voiced through the various languages that an individual has assimilated. Linguistic identification is a question of a delimited territories, and in the span of a lifetime individuals settle and move on to as many territories as they are able to assimilate, linguistically.

the language of the text, and the commentaries apropos the text drawn from the language of the critics and commentators of that text. Here exercises centre around vocabulary drills (synonym and antonym exercises), points of understanding (questions pertaining to the text or poem), etymologies, literary styles and poetic devices (exercises in simile, metaphor, rhyme-scheme creation, etc.), ideas for composition work, research and discussion. If these disciplines are continually confused very few students will be capable of thinking in the target language; a psycho-linguistic requirement which when achieved secures *creative ease* and *literary pleasure* in both disciplines.

Creative ease when translating not words but narrations, globally, in Translation Classes,³⁷ where indeed Chinese must be spoken or/and written; *literary pleasure* when analysing texts in Literature Classes, where the target language must prevail either orally or in written form. Before any analysis, however, the professor should have his or her students read aloud the text or poem in question: if it is poetry each student should read either one verse or one stanza. A more complex reading aloud exercise is to have each student read an end-rhyme which is designated to him or her: For example, if the poem is formed with heroic couplets (AABBCC), one student reads the AA, another the BB, and so on. If it is a prose text, then each student will read only one sentence, passing from one student to another until the text has been fully read. This method is called Polyphonic since each student must be attentive to the other's reading in order not to interrupt the rhythm of the reading. This exercise, too, obliges students to begin thinking in the target language since they have little time to translate what they are reading, and

37 Be it written translation or interpreting exercises, for although the methods may differ the objectives are similar: creative thinking and its application in passing from one language to another.

because they must concentrate on the reading of their classmates, too. The Polyphonic method does not function properly in translation classes because individual concentration is there required.

Students are adults; they understand quite clearly the major differences between translation and text analysis, and because they do, they also discern quite clearly the frontiers or contours of their mother tongue and those of their target tongue! They, therefore, have the means to regulate or manage their own experience of apprenticeship by instinct and by creative imagination if they are not impeded to do so by a puerile and discriminating discourse which persistently erects a security barrier that intercepts direct contact with or gradual immersion within the linguistic and cultural territories of the target language, and correlatively with their foreign professor.

When a student overcomes the security barrier ; namely, when he or she begins to think in both languages, alternating from one to the other, reading and writing in one and the other, dreaming in one and in the other, then this delimited territorial apprenticeship will have brought forth the fruits of much hard-earned labour, for it will have founded a genuine condition of biculturalism. Inversely, obsessional translation in each and every class will only reinforce the security barrier, strengthen the apprehension of the Other-foreigner, and thus legitimize the obligation to resort to interminable translation, orally and in its various written forms. It is a vicious cycle, an artificially manufactured correlation that leads to frustration and disappointment, even resentment against the target language, and consequently against the foreign professor who painstakingly teaches it.

Student timidity towards and almost fear of their foreign professors avers to the solidity of the security barrier that first and second year students have been subjected to. Avers to the anti-pedagogical strategies that have been instilled in the minds of students, of which obsessional translation has become the bulwark.

In conclusion, if text analysis and translation are not programmed and practiced as independent disciplines during the initial years of foreign language apprenticeship the majority of Chinese university students will firmly believe -as the majority of their professors do-, that to learn a foreign language, he or she must think and react in Chinese during this apprenticeship. This discursive strategy is by no means a 'cultural advantage'; it is a disastrous waste of time for both the professor and the student.

Note

Bilingual Series of Simplified or Easy-to-Read Books in English and Chinese used in Translation and Text Analysis Classes. The authors indicated are those who abridged and simplified the stories.

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