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Fidelity to the divine word was paramount and could not be compromised. Even Saint Jerome, who, at the end of the fourth century AD, recognised the shortcomings of this *ad verbum*approach, describing his own (non-biblical) translations as *ad sensum*, that is, primarily concerned with an equivalence of meaning, made an exception in the case of scriptural translation. Reverence for the original word will return in a different guise in the Renaissance, and after that, in the seventeenth century, at the other extreme, D’Ablancourt, Abraham Cowley and their ‘belles infidèles’—translations so free they dance right out of the semantic fields of the source—will obey another (or is it fundamentally the same?) fidelity: the ‘voice’ of the original.  Any model of translation that relies solely on the possibility of decanting one language into another in purely semantic terms can never produce anything better than a machine translation. To abandon absolute fidelity to the word is essentially a recognition that translation, looking beyond the words, must also be true to the world. At some point we must go beyond the source and target languages themselves to interrogate the reality that is being described. Otherwise the possibilities of misunderstanding are infinite, even at the simplest level. ‘There was a murder in the allotment’. Is this what the legal system that expresses itself in the target language would call a murder, or manslaughter, or death by misadventure? And how would we translate the notion of an allotment into Inuit? We cannot convey meaning successfully by simply substituting words harvested from some encoding or decoding apparatus, such as a dictionary. We cannot be faithful to a discourse about the world without looking at the world, whether this is the world of murders and allotments, or the domain of ideas. Incommensurability of a weak kind (the impossibility of word-for-word translation) exists between all languages. Unacknowledged incommensurability is pernicious; acknowledged, it may become good translation.  In our field, the humanities and social sciences, texts tend to be ontologically commensurable, since there is a shared practice in the academic world and a common épistème. Moreover, if we are speaking about translating between French and English, for example, we would, given the structural congruence of the languages, expect to find a very high degree of translatability, despite certain concepts, such as *sécularité*, or Foucault’s *dispositif*,which are notoriously difficult to translate into English. Leaving such problematic concepts aside (and it should be noted that these isolated cases have relatively easy solutions: footnotes, or translator’s notes, for example), the task of the translator should therefore be difficult, but straightforward. The core ideas and specific arguments of academic discourse found in the one language can, by virtue of a set of linguistic conventions capable of generating well-constructed sentences, be replicated in the other—not necessarily word-for-word, or even phrase-for-phrase, but, if necessary, by paraphrase, as Arab scholars in the early middle ages did in the case of Aristotle’s writing. We can convey the sense of ‘sécularité’ to an American; we can explain our murder in the allotment to an Inuit reader without loss of meaning.  My own team of translators and editors are not only expert linguists, but also have an academic background in the relevant disciplines; I assign them to the translation of texts in the fields with which they are familiar. What could go wrong? What remains to be *lost in translation*?  When Derrida spoke of what he called ‘the necessary and impossible task of translation’, he was, in a way, echoing Leonardo Bruni’s idea, at the dawn of the renaissance, about the latent energy of words, an energy that must be unlocked if the power of language to generate sense in and of itself, in the juxtapositions and associations it organises within an unreproducible syntax, is not to suffer emasculation. The mysterious energy of words may not survive the switch to another linguistic vehicle, but slump listlessly in the passenger seat. And this seems to me to bring us back to Jerome. Jerome was reluctant to apply the *ad sensum* approach to scripture because he thought the original syntax was a mystery. He did not dare to tamper with imponderable divine intentions. The text and its author were at some level inscrutable.  It is as if the perfect translation could be achieved only by a divine author who could simultaneously think her thoughts and intentions, as they first suffuse her consciousness, in every possible language, which is part of what Derrida meant when he said ‘the original is the first debtor, the first petitioner; it begins by lacking and by pleading for translation.’  Ah, at last, here it is: the spectre of the ‘perfect translation’, the translation which is at the same time faithful to every tint and glint of polysemy in the source text, to the domain of ideas with which it deals, to the naturalness of the target idiom... and is still an exact equivalent! It must transform and remain the same. An impossible challenge!  But leaving gods aside, does a human author, writing within a shared discourse, have the right to be inscrutable? For whom could an author be less inscrutable than for himself? Samuel Beckett, when he undertook the arduous two-year long task of translating *L’Innommable*, became simultaneously a supreme paradigm of transparency and his own reader: that reader, the projected reader of his translation, worked diligently alongside him. Between them, the members of the Beckett team made many changes to the order of words and, more significantly, to the focus of the imagery, which became more specific, more biting, more sardonic. Had his intentions changed, or did he, through the prism of English, see those intentions differently? Is *The Unnameable* faithful to *L’Innommable*? Was the translator, Mr Beckett, true to the author, Monsieur Beckett?  The author is not a god; the translator not her oracle. Perhaps it is the translator’s duty to labour towards an impossible ideal of fidelity. To paraphrase the last words of *L’Innommable*, the translator must go on, despite not being able to go on. But I see Beckett’s labour as a supreme example of what Paul Ricoeur called ‘linguistic hospitality’, the translator recollecting the hidden resources of her own language, mourning the unassimilable otherness of the source, but finally rejoicing at the richness of this new interlingual dialogue.  Both authorship and translation presuppose a post-babel fragmentation of language and its oneness: there is no shared tongue, but we still share language. In the medium of language the author inscribes thoughts and reaches forward with them. Writing is always a broken circle—broken by its intersection with the world. This disappointed circle reaches forward in an arc, as the author encounters her meaning in the very act of writing. Her work is a palimpsest of reconceptualisations, the final trajectory of thoughts made up of almost indiscernible recalibrations. The translator has to follow this arc. Just as the translation becomes, in a certain sense, the original, so the translator becomes the author. Thus at a practical level, any translator who begins work by translating even so much as the title of a text, is betraying author, reader and the art of translation itself. Fidelity to this arc, as it pierces the ideas, critical apparatus and methodologies of our several disciplines, fidelity to what drives the argument forward, to its surefootedness, to its missteps, to its struggle for clarity, is what gives the translator licence to begin to transform the text. Her ultimate goal must be to trace this arc, thereby recreating the bond between author and reader.  I began writing this presentation directly in French, a language I’ve read all my life, but still cannot speak with confidence. After two paragraphs, I had to continue in English. Something was invisible to me: the logic of my argument, the consecutivity of my thoughts. I could not see where I was going. All was clear to the end of the sentence, but beyond that the sea of words rose in high waves, shielding the horizon of thought. The first paragraph I thought out in French; the second was a struggle: English intruded and I translated simultaneously. By the third paragraph, I was drowning beneath a weight of words. What were those high breakers hiding from sight? Why did I need to revert finally to English, to conceive ‘the thing I wanted to say in its entirety’? This complete movement of thought was what I feared to betray, and it is to this I returned on dry land, at the end, to translate. From this, the translator’s vantage point, the arc was clearly visible.      Mark Mellor  Cadenza Academic Translations  Exeter  30th September 2014   |  | | --- | |  | | | | | |
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