

## ‘[We] bend down and trace with our mind’: What is translation?

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In the prose preface to his translation of Gregory the Great’s *Cura Pastoralis*, King Alfred gives us what I think is one of the most compelling descriptions of translation of all time. Being an accomplished translator himself, as well king of the West Saxons, Alfred sees translation as the most important of all intellectual activities as it enables us to ‘bend down and trace with our mind’ (Weissbort & Eysteinnsson, 2006: 36) the paths to knowledge left by those who came before us. What Alfred’s words also convey is that translation is enriching both for the individual, as it extends the reach of one’s mind, and for society, in that it helps us make connections with the ‘knowledge and wisdom’ (Ibid, 2006: 37) of ancient and faraway lands. As we will see, these two strands, the individual and the societal, are fundamental to our understanding of translation as a complex and often surprising process, involving interpretation and linguistic transfer but also cultural mediation and ethical choice.

Many of these themes were raised by the Cardiff PGR workshop on ‘Translating Medieval Documents’ (2017) and they are central to discussion of translation today. For example, questions about the nature of meaning have been crucial for theories of equivalence and how to decide which aspect should be prioritized by the translator (cf. Jenny Benham ‘Problems of Translation’ and Carol Hughes ‘Translating Old English Laws’). The multi-layered nature of meaning also speaks to the question of attestation raised by Sara Pons-Sanz and the additional challenges posed to the translator by terms we are unable to fully decode. Finally, translating for modern audiences (cf. Helle Vogt and Han Nijdam) raises the important issue of what to do when meaning is embedded in a context that is far removed from that of your reader. This article seeks to locate some of these discussions within current definitions of translation, showing how relevant they are to recent debates on the nature of translation both within the discipline of translation studies and beyond. After a brief overview of the many possible ways one could define translation, the article explores two important questions all translators should pose themselves: what do we translate (meaning, context, culture) but also why do we translate (for what purpose, what audience, what agenda)? While translating is often seen as an intuitive activity that requires little reflection, I hope that posing these questions and seeing the kind of answers theorists have given will help make you more empowered and successful translators.

Translation is one of the most universal of human activities and yet one of the most difficult to pin down in terms of definition. The English word ‘translation’ (from the Medieval Latin *translatio*) is inherently tied to the idea of transferring something from one place to another (from the Classical Latin *transfēre*). The older and primary meaning of the word in the Romano-Christian tradition is associated with the processing of religious texts into vernacular languages especially in relation to Bible translation but also, intriguingly, with the movement of religious relicts (Tymoczko 2007: 56-57). The words for translation in other European languages, such as Spanish and Italian, have slightly different meanings as they derive from the classical Latin verb *traducere* meaning ‘carrying across’ or ‘bearing across’. Despite the different roots, ‘translation’ and *traduzione/traducción* are underpinned by the same assumption: that meaning can be carried over and reach the other language or culture intact. The image that is conjured up is that of a kernel of meaning that can be packaged and sent on its way. These metaphorical associations, evoked by the term ‘translation’ in the Western tradition, often portray the translator or interpreter as a transporter (or perhaps a smuggler) carrying some ‘sacred’ content across time and space.

As scholars have begun to acknowledge an Anglophone/Western bias to our understanding of translation, other, new and at times surprising definitions have started to emerge. For example, the contemporary Arabic word for translation is *tarjama*, originally meaning ‘biography’. The connection with the narrative genre of the biography suggests that the term is associated with the act of ‘telling and recounting’ (rather than transferring) (Salama-Carr 2000: 102). In Chinese, on the other hand, the term for ‘translation’ - *fanyi* - can be rendered literally as ‘turning over’. It comprises of a character for *fan*, ‘turning (the page of a book)’, and a character for *yi*, meaning ‘interpretation’, ‘exchange’. It can be linked to the idea of embroidery, where turning over reveals the other side. In other words, the original and the translation are envisaged as the front and back of the same object, thus bringing together the idea of sameness in difference. The second character *yi* (‘exchange’) also activates associations with commerce (Cheung 2005).

Even such a cursory glance at the meaning of the word ‘translation’ across languages teaches us at least two things. Firstly, that our understanding of translation is saturated with Western history, Western ideology and Western religious meanings and practices. Secondly, that translation enables us to look at the same phenomenon through different eyes, revealing meaning to be far from universal, but rather historically and culturally determined.

### **What do we translate? Translation as linguistic and cultural transfer**

There is a very strong layman’s perception that translation is simple and unproblematic. This is because translation is everywhere around us and, most of the time, we hardly notice it is there. We have access to what happens on the other side of the globe through foreign reports and subtitled interviews, we consume foreign foods that have become part of our vocabulary (*panini*, *samosas*, *sushi*) while automatic translators make foreign texts accessible at the click of a mouse. Translation today feels immediate, fast and trouble free. However, the fallacy with such thinking is immediately visible when we stop to consider what really happens to a word, a concept or a text when it is actually translated. Far from being a straightforward process of linguistic substitution, translation involves complex negotiation between languages, cultures and people.

A simple yet illuminating example of such complexity is given by the Russian scholar Roman Jakobson in an essay which has become a classic in translation studies. In ‘On Linguistic Aspects of Translation’, Jakobson points out that what we call ‘cheese’ in English does not correspond to the Russian *syr*, the term one would ordinarily find as the equivalent of ‘cheese’ in an English-Russian dictionary (Jakobson, 2012: 127). While the English word ‘cheese’ conjures up images of rectangular or circular blocks often with rinds that can be grated and sliced, Russian *syr* is soft and creamy, usually in a tub and is spread rather than sliced. And the differences are not limited to appearance and consistency. ‘Cheese’ can be defined generically as a ‘food made of pressed curds’ but *syr* falls outside this semantic field because it is subject to a process of fermentation that arguably turns it into a different food product. Does this mean that *syr* is ‘untranslatable’ in English? No, it simply shows that translation is not a substitution of words for other words with the same meaning but the expression of concepts and ideas from one language through a different combination of words in another language and this always involves an approximation of meaning. In the case of *syr*, we can approximate its meaning as ‘cottage cheese’ in English, combining the generic word ‘cheese’ with the pre-modifier ‘cottage’ to extend its meaning to milk-based foods that involve a process of fermentation.

What translators do in these cases is to devise different strategies that allow them to convey the message (or part of it) in a form that is acceptable and understood by the target audience.

The discipline of Translation Studies was dominated for decades by debates over different strategies to overcome these very problems of equivalence. Of all the different approaches proposed, the one that has had more currency in translation theory, but also the most lasting impact on translation practice, is Eugene Nida's concept of 'dynamic equivalence', or equivalence of effect (Munday, 2012: 60-65). Drawing on Noam Chomsky's generative linguistics, Nida believed that language was constituted by a deep structure (or kernel of meaning) that was then encoded in a surface structure which is subject to phonological and morphemic rules. While the surface varies from language to language, the kernel of meaning is, for Nida, understandable and, more importantly, transferrable, across languages. Nida's advice to translators is that they should disregard the surface form and focus on the kernels of meaning which should be re-encoded using forms of the target language that are idiomatic and natural-sounding.

Any bilingual or multilingual speaker will immediately recognize the points that Jakobson and Nida are making, for even very small children with more than one language learn very quickly that some things can be said in one of their languages but not the other. In our household, where we speak a rather idiosyncratic mixture of English and Italian, my daughters would begin the meal by wishing everyone 'Buon appetito', a tradition present in most European languages but strangely absent from British etiquette, and then proceed to add 'please' at the end of every request (as in 'can I have some water, please?'). This is completely absent in informal interactions in Italian and makes our Italian relatives marvel at the 'extraordinary politeness' of British education. This kind of understanding is the issue at the very heart of translation: not only are languages not the same, but their usage in a variety of different semantic combinations, contexts and situations is rarely homologous. As Nida argues in his defence of equivalence of effect, although words are not equivalent across languages, they are always translatable and explainable through different linguistic forms. It follows that the task of the translator requires a negotiation that is both linguistic and cultural.

In fact, the more culture-specific the text is, the harder you have to work to disentangle its message and explain its meanings. When you are faced with translating a situation or set of behaviours that are not easily replicable outside that culture, your task as a translator becomes seemingly impossible. I have recently experienced an example of such cultural specificity while watching the Italian TV series 'The Young Montalbano' on British television. The series' dialogues are in a mixture of standard Italian and Sicilian and are subtitled in English for BBC viewers. The scene in question depicts Inspector Montalbano having coffee with a possible suspect in a coffee bar in the main square of the fictitious Sicilian village of Vigata. At the end of their conversation, the suspect stands up and tells the bar owner '*Giovannino, tutto pagato*' [Lit. Giovannino, all paid]. The subtitle reads 'Giovannino, put it on my tab'. On one level, this is both an accurate and a successful translation because it renders the meaning of the utterance (that the cost of the coffee will be covered by the speaker) in a form that conforms to English idiomatic usage. However, the cultural context in which the interaction occurs grants the utterance a very different (and much less benevolent) meaning. Viewers know from previous conversations that the suspect is a member of the powerful Sinagra family, the local Mafia lords who control all businesses in the area. In this context, in opposition to what Nida would have us believe, the form of the utterance is what determines its meaning. The fact that the speaker used the expression *tutto pagato* ['all paid'] rather than *mettimelo sul conto* ['put it on my tab'] communicates not only, or not primarily, that the suspect is paying for the Inspector's

coffee but that the suspect, as a local *mafioso*, effectively owns the bar and does not need to pay for his purchases. What appears in the English translation as a generous or perhaps sycophantic act, aimed at getting on the right side of the inspector, is in fact a threatening gesture, aimed at reinforcing the perception that the *mafiosi* are above normal citizens and importantly above the law and the reach of the police. On this more contextually and culturally complex level, then, the subtitle is neither accurate nor successful as it fails to capture the central meaning of the utterance. Such a complex culture-specific context can only be grasped in English through what I have just done here, which Antony Appiah calls ‘thick translation’, an ethnographic explanation of the multiple cultural and contextual layers that underpin linguistic expression (Appiah, 2012: 331).

As we have seen, neither Jakobson’s nor Nida’s idea of translation is perfect. There is more to the question of what translation translates than meets the eye. Sometimes what we need to translate is not just the meaning of a word, a sentence or even a text, but an entire worldview.

### **Why do we translate? Translation as communicative action**

As we have seen from the examples in the previous section, translation is not only about reproducing existing meaning, transferring ‘the sacred’ message like our Western etymologies would have us believe. What we are translating (whether it is the abstract dictionary meaning or a contextual or culture-specific meaning) is not the only aspect that decides what translators should do. Our Arabic term for translation, *tarjama*, and its etymological link to ‘narrating and recounting’ is better suited to help us explore this further aspect. Translation is not only an interpretation of a given text, but it is also an act of communication in itself, an action that occurs, regardless of its source text, in a specific context, at a specific time, with a specific audience. Like Shahrazad, the heroin narrator of *A Thousand and One Nights*, whose life depends on her ability to tell a story that will grip and please the Sultan, translators base their livelihood on their ability to create a text that will satisfy their clients. To achieve this, a translated text needs to be understood in the target language while also fulfilling its function not only for a new cultural context but often a new moment in time and a new audience.

These considerations are what lead many scholars to abandon the endless quest for defining what it is that we translate (meaning, form, culture) and turn instead to why we translate, what are the purposes of our translations and how we go about determining them. To distinguish between the function of a text and the purpose of a translation, Hans Vermeer uses the Greek word for purpose, *skopos* (Nord, 2001:26). While source texts and translations can have the same function, for example they can both be literary texts aimed at educating/entertaining readers, *skopos* indicates not the function of the text but the purpose of translating it (what Vermeer calls ‘the *skopos* of the translational action’) (Nord, 2001:26-32). Vermeer offers a very striking example from the context of legal translation to illustrate the importance of *skopos*. In his hypothetical example, the text is an old French book reporting a lawsuit about a will that bequeaths a considerable sum of money to two nephews. At a certain point in the will an inkblot causes a crucial ambiguity over one word that could be either *deux* (‘two’) or *d’eux* (‘of them’). The lawsuit is about whether the sentence was *a chacun deux cent mille francs* (‘to each two thousand hundred francs’) or *a chacun d’eux cent mille francs* (‘to each of them, one thousand hundred francs’). Now, how should the translator proceed in translating the source text? Should they explain the ambiguity, which makes sense only in French, or should they substitute it for something more understandable by the target audience? Vermeer argues that

you cannot know how to translate it until you have asked yourself: why are you translating this? for what purpose, what audience? Your translation strategy will change depending on your answer to those questions.

For example, imagine that the Swedish crown court have commissioned you to translate the French text because they have encountered a similar case and want to know how other European courts have handled such textual ambiguities. Then the purpose will be to give the judge access to the original document in all its complexity, explaining via footnotes and a detailed discussion of the facts of the case and the context of the textual ambiguity. Now, what if the story occurred as a minor incident in a detective novel instead? Here, its sole purpose is to give motive to an altercation between the two nephews. Would you provide explanatory footnotes and lengthy explanations? Probably not. With such a different purpose, it would make more sense to find an equivalent solution in the target language (like the omission of a comma in the sum allocated to one of the nephews 200,000 as opposed to 2,000). This way you would be able to provide motive for the altercation between the nephews without interrupting the flow of the narrative which is crucial to the success of a detective novel.

Christiane Nord proposes a very useful distinction between the two strategies used by our fictitious translators in the Vermeer example: she calls them *documentary* and *instrumental* translation. The first aims to render in the target language *a document* of certain aspects of a communicative interaction that has occurred in the source language ('a linguistic ambiguity in French which has led to legal complexities'). Here the target audience is very well aware that what they are reading is a translation which is only one interpretation of an original text. The second, instrumental translation, instead serves as an independent *instrument* for a new communicative interaction between the source text and the target audience. In this case, the audience is not aware that this is a translation and relates to the text as if it had been written in the target language.

The point of this example is that translations do not happen in a void; they always have a purpose and a specific audience in mind. And purpose is as crucial to choosing a translation strategy as the nature of meaning. Translators should always ask themselves: why are we translating this text? This is a very useful question because it makes the translator aware of the role they play as writers, narrators, cultural mediators (as opposed to transporters or transmitters of meaning).

We have seen that translation is not a simple term to define nor a straightforward process of substitution of words from one language to another as contemporary technology would have us think. Translation is a complex, linguistic, cultural and communicative process requiring sensitivity to language difference but also an ability to communicate across text types and audiences. The notion of purpose has helped us see that translation is never a simple reproduction of an original text but a new text with a new purpose for a specific audience. This makes our task as translators more challenging, because we have a plethora of different strategies to choose from and, ultimately, the responsibility for our choices and their consequences lies with us and only us. However, at a time when the public discourse of borders and walls seems to be winning the majority vote, being a translator can enable us to continue building those bridges across time and space by 'bending down and tracing with our minds' the paths to knowledge of those who came before us, in the hope of making the world around us a richer, more understanding and more tolerant place.

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