

TRANSLATION AND CULTURAL INTERFERENCE

A paper with this title probably should start by defining «translation» and «culture» and, perhaps even «interference». I would feel somewhat foolish at a translators' conference to try to define «translation». Besides, it is a task that no one has quite accomplished yet. There are many translation theories, some that are based on a framework of linguistic reference, others on literary and philosophical concepts and yet others on psychological processes. It seems then that every theory which excludes any of the mentioned elements must remain piecemeal and I sympathize with who, with tongue in cheek, ask whether a meaningful translation theory can be created at all and moreover, whether one is really needed. The only restriction I would like to make about «translation» is to say that I am a literary translator, or, more precisely, that I translate literature, mostly poetry and mostly from the Scandinavian languages into English. Therefore, the examples I will give during my presentation are all taken from that area.

I will not try to define «interference» either, but hope that this becomes clear from the context. Unfortunately, there seems to be no way around «culture». «Culture» generally is one of those elusive concepts which more often than not is used too generally to be useful (just like the concept «translation»). But I think for my purposes I could adopt C. Kluckhohn's concise definition. In his opinion culture comprises «all those historically created designs for living, explicit, implicit, rational, irrational and nonrational»¹. A Taylor expresses the same thought when he says: «Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, customs, and any other capacities and habits acquired by man as a member of society»². It seems that a broad definition like this would be acceptable to an anthropologist, a sociologist, a psychologist and even a translator. It probably would not suffice for a linguist. Linguists, as, for instance, R. Gladstone, like to intertwine language and culture:

Language is at once an outcome or a result of the culture as a whole and also a vehicle by which other facets of the culture are shaped and communicated. The language we learn as a child gives us not only a system for communication, but, more importantly, it dictates the type and the form of the communications we make³.

1 C. Kluckhohn, *Mirror for Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949).

2 A. Taylor, in *Language in Culture*, H. Hoijer, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

3 J. R. Gladstone, «Language and Culture» in *English Language Teaching*, 23 (1969), p. 144.

The next step would be to discuss the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and such items as speech registers, slang, etc. This, for my purposes, would muddy the waters too much and I would like to stay with the initially given broader definition.

Mostly, cultural interference manifests itself in the reader, and there it is not even limited to translations, but can apply to any text. I grew up as a child in postwar Germany. When we were at the age of 8 to 14 we read, no, we devoured, as many as we possibly could of the 65 volumes which constitute Karl May's collected works. A good portion of them are action-packed Western stories, featuring the Indians, white settlers and mountain men. I remember distinctly that the landscape in these stories was, nay, had to be German. My mental eye saw German forests, meadows and hills. And there were sentences like «*how, I have spoken*» and the mountain men had names like «*Old Firehand*» and «*Old Shatterhand*». (The expressions in italics are to be sounded out with German phonemes). But there also was the keen feeling of geographic distances, of cultural variance, that it really must have been otherwise, different. However, the feeling remained just that, an undefinable feeling. The irony of this anecdote is that Karl May never set foot on U.S. soil either, so that his juvenile readers then and now in Germany end up with fake to the nth degree impressions of the Wild West.

The Norwegian writer Sigrid Undset's famous trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter* (a novel about Medieval Norway), I read first in German translation. I was a 21-year-old student at the time who had never been to Norway. Four years later I reread the books after having lived in Norway for a time, and suddenly the story teemed with life; I could actually see the mountains and valleys come alive. I understood the significance of words like *winter* and *summer*, words which have far different connotations for someone used to mild winters and long summers; and the thoughts and feelings expressed by Undset's *dramatis personae* became strangely familiar.

In other words then, when we read texts which describe foreign settings, and translations by definition almost always do this, we often encounter a cultural barrier. As far as the Norwegian scene is concerned, I coined for this phenomenon the expression «boat and birch»-syndrome. For a Norwegian from the coast, a word like «boat» means much more than to let's say, an American Midwesterner. The boat is part of his history, his present economy, his transportation, his pleasure. It is then, a basic concept in his culture, charged with traditions, deep emotions, a wide field of associations and sensory perceptions, in short, a *key word*. For instance, there are countless poems in Norwegian, where the word «boat» makes up part of the title or constitutes the central pieces of Norwegian imagery. To illustrate the relationship a Norwegian has to something as prosaic as a birch tree, I would like to read a very short children's poem by Tarjei Vesaas:

The Night, Gunnar and the Birch Tree

The moon shines brightly outside the walls.

The birch tree has white legs.

The birch stands in the dark.
Gunnar's window is dark.

The birch goes wading in the meadow.
Little Gunnar sleeps tight in his bed.

No one can come and harm you.
The birch stands watch over you.

Now I would like to quote a few sentences from a novel by Trygve Tulgranssen:

The stove in her room still was warm and she opened its door and threw a few birch logs on the fire. She breathed in the fragrance of the wood which was stacked against the wall. The wood itself was like all the warmth and comfort one could wish for in this world. The birch is white and smooth as silk when standing on the meadows, the princess of summer and a warm, comforting fragrant houseguest in winter. She stroked with her hand over a silken smooth log—like a caress.

Now let us read the little poem one more time.

Isn't it less elusive now that we have heard the human emotions the birch tree evokes?

Nature imagery then, nature-metaphors, nature-symbolism permeate Norwegian poetry, old and modern, to a degree which is startling to anyone coming from a different culture. However, this is not surprising. After all, Norway has very dramatic nature, rich with contrasts, harboring all sorts of extremes. Thus Norwegian is richer in expressions and vocabulary that designate nature phenomena than for example English. There are more than 10 different words in Norwegian which all would have to be rendered in English as «mountain». For others, there simply is no translation that would convey the scope of meaning of the original. (One example: *tela*, which is basically that layer of earth that remains solidly frozen throughout the winter. Neither «frost» nor «frozen earth» would cover the meaning sufficiently; perhaps «frost in the earth» would come close, but then it lacks the time element.) Still, most of these nature-words, although some might be more obstinate than others, can be circumscribed adequately in English too; sometimes, however, one word results in an entire clause in English and there is always, of course, a loss of color in the language of the translation.

But, back to the «boat and birch»-syndrome; what can a translator do to solve cultural problems? Some possibilities come to mind. If he wants to face up to the truth, the translator could introduce explanatory footnotes. But B. Raffel—in my opinion, very adequately—dispenses with footnotes as follows:

Any translation which is sprinkled with footnotes is on its face bad, because it means that the translator is relying on an illegitimate means of making the reader aware of

what's going on. Even if it were a good translation, it's going to drive the reader crazy going to the back of the book or the bottom of the page⁴.

It would obviously be similarly objectionable to introduce other external cultural «amplifiers» such as the insertion of some reproductions of J. C. Dahl's and Kittelsen's excellent paintings and drawings of Norwegian nature. Although I am sympathetic to the view that many translation critics espouse, namely that the translation of a poem or a novel should stand entirely on its own merits, without footnotes, illustrations and other external paraphernalia, I think, nevertheless, that a comprehensive introduction by the translator might help raise cultural awareness. I have never been to Indonesia. I am sure I could read an anthology of Indonesian poetry in good translation and get something out of it, likewise a novel. The themes and topics are always the same anyway: love, death, loneliness, happiness, sorrow, aggressiveness, etc. But any additional, external cultural information I can receive, opens another window, sheds more light, or at least a different light on what I have read. I can only hope to achieve cultural approximation anyway; even if I go to Indonesia and learn the language, I will not become native, just as little as I ever will be a native American, although I have lived in this country 16 years and know a lot about the American way of life. But, for instance, I never went to elementary school or to high school in this country and I will never have this experience which is shared by all other Americans.

In any case then, as far as the «boat and birch»-syndrome is concerned, the onus seems to be on the reader; he has to solve the problem by way of mental acculturation processes, i.e., by reading more, by experiencing, by traveling. For the translator, this problem remains intangible and unsolvable. This is a conclusion I reached a long time ago, but I always found it bothersome to live with —until a couple of years ago when I read Eugenio Coseriu's excellent essay «Falsche und richtige Fragestellungen in der Übersetzungstheorie» («False and Correct Questioning in Regard to Translation Theory»). I highly recommend this essay to all those who haven't read it— it's the only attempt to create a basis for a translation theory which comes close to satisfying logical, philosophical, linguistic and literary demands, which I have seen, and all that without abandoning some common sense. Coseriu then formally absolves translators from cultural burdens, not from all, since as stated initially, culture and language are intertwined, but from the more extrinsic ones. He says (in German, the translation is mine):

The actual, rational limitation of translation is not given through the difference of languages, through languages as systems of signification, but through the reality brought to bear in the texts (including language as reality). It should be emphasized: only that which is said, only language in its sign function in the narrow sense, can be translated, but not «extralingual realities», which the text presupposes, nor the realities in the text, in so far as they function as *realities*⁵.

4 B. Raffel, *Why Re-Create*, The National Humanities Faculty Why Series (San Francisco: Chandler and Sharp, 1973), p. 27.

5 E. Coseriu, «Falsche und richtige Fragestellungen in der Übersetzungstheorie» in *Theory and Practice of Translation*, ed. L. Grähs, G. Korlén, B. Mahnberg (Bern: Peter Lang, 1978), p. 29.

By this definition then culture is clearly not the translator's concern if it is «extralingual». There arises, however, a problem: what is «extralingual» and what is not? And perhaps a couple of brief attempts at definition of translation are in order. Most modern theories of translation operate with the concept of «equivalence». For J. C. Catford, translation is: «the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language»⁶. R. Jakobson says: «two equivalent messages in two different codes»⁷ and Nida and Taber: «Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style»⁸.

All of these definitions let us off the hook: the closest natural equivalent in terms of meaning and in terms of style to the Norwegian *bjerka* is «birch» and to the Norwegian *bat* is «boat» in English, without any shadow of a doubt.

But other culture-related problems are «intralingual» and demand the translator's attention. I would like to give one example, a poem by the same author as in the previous example, Tarjei Vesaas.

First snow

The air stands stiff and still,
high sails the hawk,
hunting—
a winter day begins.

Silently each house becomes a fortress,
turns its walls against the chill—
savagely the snowclouds lash out.

Soon the first prints
lead over the white yard.
Thus winter comes—
and goes—
up north.

The poem is very simple and was fairly easy to translate. Image is piled upon image, expressing the immediacy and the chilling threat of an impending winter, to end laconically with the anticlimatic announcement of winter's arrival. And this announcement in a literal translation is: «then, the winter has come to the North».

6 J. C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation. An Essay in Applied Linguistics* (London: n.p., 1965).

7 R. Jakobson, «On Linguistic Aspects of Translation», in Brower, ed., *On Translation* (n.p.: n.p., 1959).

8 E. Nida and Ch. R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: n.p., 1969).

This last line pulls the rug from under us. The literal translation of the line, which has a very definite, almost proverbial ring to it in Norwegian, obviously does not do justice to the original. But since the last line seems to have a softening, slightly positive and certainly an ironic tone, I compromised on: «thus winter comes—and goes— up north». I captured the optimistic quality contained in the «going» and the proverbial quality. This ironic element had to be sacrificed, also largely the content of the word «north» which to Scandinavians means their home country. Clearly, in this case, some of the cultural aspects had to be dealt with. I content myself with one example. W. Koller, in his article «Prolegomena zu einer Typologie schwedisch-deutscher Übersetzungsprobleme»⁹ gives an entire set of examples which deal with similar problems, using a Swedish-into-German model.

Norway has two official languages. Seventy-five percent of the people speak *bokmal*, a form of language which is basically Danish (adopted during 400 years of Danish rule) yet with Norwegian pronunciation and intonation and a changed orthography. Twenty-five speak *nynorsk*, a language that is not organically grown, but was created during the age of Romanticism and national resurgence by one man from Old Norse and elements of South Central dialects. During the last 100 years both languages have often changed their graphic appearance, *bokmal* trying to become more and more distinctly non Danish, *nynorsk* adopting more moderate forms trying to appeal more to the *bokmal*-speaking population. The result is that any educated Norwegian can, by casting one glance at a text, determine almost to the decade when something was written—an element which without doubt must get lost in translation, no matter what philosophy about chronology in translation the translator might have. Or to stay with the terminology used earlier, there can be no equivalence. More important yet though, there are social implications here, since from the form of language a Norwegian writer uses, one can often place him politically and philosophically—a feature which would be extremely difficult to duplicate in the translation. It would be futile to attempt it. In addition, to complicate matters further, Norway, and Scandinavia in general, is very rich in the variety of local dialects. Traditionally, Scandinavians take pride in their home dialects and never try to hide them. Naturally, dialects are thus incorporated in scores and scores of literary works; poems, entire novels are written in dialect. And many writers, although they may strive to write in a standardized language still evidence traces of dialect.

Coseriu, again, has a solution for us. He relates his comments in regard to the dialect to German which also has a wealth of dialects:

In a High-German text, e.g., a character may speak Bavarian or with Bavarian traits. As a matter of principle, what the character says can be translated, but not the Bavarian features of the speech. But the Bavarian element as such may have a certain function in the text: that function namely which Hjelmslev calls «connotation» and

9 W. Koller, «Prolegomena zu einer Typologie schwedisch-deutscher Übersetzungsprobleme» in *Grundprobleme der Übersetzungstheorie unter besonderer Berücksichtigung schwedisch-deutscher Übersetzungsfälle* (Bern: Francke, 1972).

which better would be called «evocation»: it evokes associations which one might ascribe in the German language community to Bavaria. The same is valid *mutatis mutandis* for the language level and language styles of historic language... Here no translation, only an adaption is possible: If it is important, in order to maintain meaning, a dialect has to be chosen in the target language which in the corresponding language community can evoke the same —or more or less similar— as the Bavarian may evoke in the German language community¹⁰.

These are words to the wise and theoretically, without doubt, very sound. But it is also the one instance where I heartily disagree with Coseriu. First of all, the American translator soon realizes that there is a dearth of dialects in his own country. But more importantly, to me it seems very questionable to render dialogs in a Hamsun novel, for example, which are written in some Northern Norwegian dialect, into Appalachian hillbilly; the only result, as far as translations are concerned, would be unwarranted comic effects. What then, is one to do in a case like this? It is my experience that those translations are best which do not try to substitute one dialect for another (which can rarely be done consistently anyway), but rather use a colloquial type of language instead. It is already obvious that the problem of dialect is more a cultural than a linguistic one. Often we picture someone who speaks a certain dialect as a stereotype representing certain features of character ascribed to people coming from one geographic area. For example, if in a Norwegian novel someone speaks the dialect used in the province of Trøndelag we see in front of us a heavy set man, slow, proud, harsh, rather unapproachable, very individualistic and self-centered. Obviously it is very difficult to find a dialect or form a slang in English which would parallel the original. On the other hand, using colloquial English alone is not sufficient either; the translator here might want to enhance the descriptive parts in such a way as to shed more light on the character¹¹.

It is clear by now that culture as related to location, space, can be a translation problem. It has to be added that time, i.e., relative chronology can also be a problem. B. Raffel¹² makes a convincing case for the fact that works written in centuries past should be translated into *current* English for the simple reason that they were not meant to be archaic at the time they were written. Furthermore archaisms slant the work into unwarranted directions, invoke involuntary hilarity and are generally indigestible to the modern audience.

It follows quite naturally then also that translations age, even though some canonized translations such as the Tieck-Schlegel Shakespeare translation in German may be valid and unsurpassed for centuries. But the criterion is that a new translation becomes necessary whenever the language in the previous one is felt to be antiquated, dated.

10 E. Coseriu, p. 27.

11 Cf. F. H. König, «Problems in Translating Scandinavian Literature into English» in *Meanings: A Common Ground of Linguistics and Literature*, ed. D. L. F. Nilsen (Cedar Falls, Iowa: n.p., 1973), p. 103.

12 B. Raffel, p. 19 ff.

In conclusion I would like to state that the act of translation evidences two spheres of culture-related problems: extralingual and intralingual ones. With Coseriu I would maintain that the extralingual problems cannot be solved by the translator and that the intralingual ones, on the other hand, have to be considered and dealt with, although no solutions might emerge.

The issue of culture demands much of the translator. H. S. Straight in his essay «Knowledge, Purpose, and Intuition: Three Dimensions in the Evaluation of Translation» sums up the cultural and linguistic knowledge (based on remarks by Nida and Taber) as follows¹³:

Certainly the most obvious, and probably the most important, factor contributing to the success of a translation is the translator's knowledge. Flaws or gaps in knowledge of the linguistic system and cultural context of the author of the original will keep the translator from understanding it; similarly, successful communication with the intended audience of the translation depends upon full and accurate knowledge of their language and culture. The range of such knowledge is very great indeed (see table); few translators possess the degree of bilingualism/biculturalism necessary to be free of any danger of error along this dimension.

TABLE. *Outline of Knowledge Translators Must Have*

I. *Ecology*

climate, terrain (desert, rain forest, mountains, etc.)

flora, fauna (roses, willows, rodents, wombats, etc.)

exploitation patterns (slash-and-burn agriculture, coon hunting, cave dwelling, deep-sea fishing, etc.—

overlaps with category II)

II. *Material Culture, Technology*

household objects (machetes, mackinaws, gourds, Pepsi, etc.)

housing, other buildings (chalets, teepees, etc.)

means of transportation (oxcarts, jumbo jets, snowshoes, etc.)

technical knowledge (penicillin, Polaris, poisons, etc.)

III. *Social Organization*

classes, kinship categories, sex roles (clerics, uncles, male nurses, panhandlers, etc.)

legal, political system (headman, electioneering, etc.)

IV. *Mythic Patterns*

cosmology (Eden, nirvana, Milky Way, etc.)

taboos (profanity, mother-in-law avoidance, body odor, etc.)

supernatural notions (ancestor worship, transmigration, etc.)

V. *Linguistic Structures*

sound system (especially important for songs or poems, but also whenever rhyme, rhythm, or alliteration is present)

word formation (especially important when obligatory markings of number, gender, tense, etc., are found in one language but not the other, but also when word formations are used in the original for stylistic purposes)

13 H. S. Straight, «Knowledge, Purpose, and Intuition: Three Dimensions in the Evaluation of Translation», in *Translation Spectrum*, ed. M. Gaddis Rose (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1981), pp. 41-42.

word meanings (number of near-synonyms for a given concept can differ radically between languages; idiomatic and metaphorical expressions constitute the most frequent and most obvious source of translation difficulties)

syntactic relations (problems arise because of such things as different resources in regard to conjunctions and other transition markers and/or other markers of co-reference) pronouns

The demands on the translator, thus, are high. Almost by definition his result is a hybrid product, a compromise: some traits of the original by linguistic, cultural and aesthetic necessity are always sacrificed. On the other hand, the translator brings to his encoding process the sum of his own knowledge, his own human experience, his value system; elements which all will help shape the translation. It is incumbent on the translator to render his own mind and personality into an asset for the translation process, not into an obstacle and the more linguistic, cultural and aesthetic insights the translator has, the better his chances to translate well. The reader of the translation also has to apply his mind in order to change the dead text into living matter. In other words, his reading process is rather similar to that of the translator's when he reads the original. It follows then quite naturally that the reader of the translation, in order to gain appreciation of cultural issues, had better strive to gain a basic knowledge of points I-IV as well, because these are issues a translation, as we have seen, may not be able to address.

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