

*‘Traduttore, traditore’* – the Italian saying means *‘The translator is a traitor’*.

This saying has inspired and frustrated translators: who wants a job of which the best that can be said is that if you do it well enough, it renders you invisible?

Write an essay on translation and its hazards in any area in which you have encountered it, from literature and film to marketplaces and A+E departments.

‘Traduttore, traditore’

The Italian expression, ‘translator, traitor’, implores the question of who the translator is betraying. A failure to accurately translate a text is comparable to betraying the reader, losing as they do, the experience derived from the original text. But perhaps the more obvious explanation is that the translator betrays the author if they veer too far from the original text. Since all languages are different, semantic and syntactic discrepancies arise when translating. The translator must choose between translating literally, which often results in a lack of fluency in the target language (henceforth the TL) or aiming to translate the author’s meaning rather than their words, and risk being labelled a traitor to the author.

Translation is defined as “the process of translating words or text from one language into another” by the Oxford English Dictionary (2019). Although it could be argued that translation is also possible within a language and between dialects, this essay will explore translation between languages, as outlined by this definition. Beginning with the obstacles faced by translators, the causes of various translation errors will be assessed. The latter part of the essay will consider the tools at the translator’s disposal to produce accurate and faithful translations, whilst acknowledging the impossibility of ‘perfect’ translation. Translation is a fundamental necessity in the global 21<sup>st</sup> century, and as it evolves and develops, the role and objective of the translator requires reflection.

One needn’t look far to find discernible errors in translation, whether it be a dubious article on a restaurant menu or questionable subtitles on a video clip. Errors in translation have baffled and amused societies around the world for centuries.

A lack of translation from Latin enabled lawyers and doctors, amongst other professionals, to operate under a veil of secrecy, thus retaining security in their work by excluding outsiders. In 1653, an English physician, Nicholas Culpeper, sought to allow healers who couldn’t understand Latin access to medical and pharmaceutical knowledge. He published *The English Physician*, now commonly known as *Culpeper’s Complete Herbal*, having translated the original text from Latin into English, so that ordinary people “may cure themselves, and never beholding to Physicians as the inquiry of these times affords” (Culpeper, 1794, pp.34). Culpeper’s proposal threatened the monopoly held by university-educated physicians, especially since his herbal cost only three pence- a price comparable to one pound of almonds (Petch, n.d.). Perhaps because of his revolutionary idea, *Culpeper’s Herbal* remains in print today (Culpeper, 2009).

Historically, translation formed a crucial aspect of religion. Before the translation of the bible from Latin, the role of the priest or vicar necessitated relaying its tales to the congregation in terms which they understood. The translation of the 1611 *King James Version* marked a significant change in attitudes, whereby a Bible edition was produced in English under the authority of the king. The Version itself charted new territory in religious translation by allowing the use of ‘vulgar’ names to familiarise English speakers (*Yonah* was translated from Hebrew into *Jonah*) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). The Version was generally accepted as the standard English Bible from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, and from the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Catholics, until

the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, whereupon it was superseded by the *Jerusalem Bible*. It is the process of translation for the *King James Version* which reveals various strategies to avoid translation errors. 47 scholars helped translate the bible, with the process taking several years. This demonstration of crowd translation aptly presents the merits of the system at the time of its inception: close collaboration between translators and thorough scrutiny of the translation. However, the drawbacks of modern-day crowd translation equally became evident; the management of the huge task, coupled with translators split across different sites in different cities, made progress slow.

Whilst religious translation often carries a particular significance for those who embark upon it, equally important is translation for diplomacy and foreign relations. Cultural differences between societies inevitably create obstacles which lead to humorous situations at best, and potential disasters at worst. When Emmanuel Macron, president of France, thanked Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull, in English, for hosting his visit, Australians noted a peculiarity in his speech:

I want to thank you for your welcome, thank you and your delicious wife for your warm welcome, (McAuley, 2018)

Although commentators were quick to joke about Macron's choice of adjective and its potential sexual or cannibalistic connotations, the French adjective *délicieux* is applicable to a person as much as to a meal. Whilst a dictionary translation of the word would suggest *delicious*, the word would be more accurately interpreted as *delightful* or *lovely* when applied to a person.

Translation can present more startling diplomatic dangers too; Ottoman Sultan Murad III composed his letters to Queen Elizabeth I, whom he considered to be an insignificant monarch dwarfed by his own almighty power, in Turkish. His translator, or *dragoman*, translated his letters into Italian, a language understood by the Queen, however, in doing so, he altered the Ottoman's compliment of the Queen's "subservience and devotion" to instead praise her "sincere friendship" (Reynolds, 2016). Hence, it is demonstrated that translation can be a method of disguise as much as clarification.

Beyond even the choice of language, translation errors abound when faced with the challenge of translating writing style. The translator must decide between literal translation, which risks losing its distinctive voice and sounding disjointed in the TL, and attempting to retain the writing style whilst straying further from the original text. The choice is especially inexorable in the case of idioms and clichés. To consider Shakespeare's Sonnet 18:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? (Shakespeare and Burrow, 2008)

Israeli poet Anna Herman translated the line into Hebrew as follows:

האם אתה דומה ליום אביבי?

Do you resemble a spring day? (Jacobs, 2018)

The translator recognises that, to a reader from another culture, a summer's day may be neither rare nor beautiful, hence the spring day captures these connotations more accurately in the TL.

Whilst meaning may be lost in translation, it can equally add new connotations to a text. Upon translating *Harry Potter and the chamber of secrets* (Rowling, 1997) into French, Jean-François Ménard (2007) altered *Tom Marvelo Riddle's* name; he became *Tom Elvis Jedusor*, which is not only an anagram- *je suis Voldemort*- but *Jedusor* also sounds similar to *jeux de sort*, meaning a twist of fate.

Alongside lexical challenges, translators must also manipulate grammar between languages to achieve a fluent product. Whilst grammatical disparities exist between all languages, it becomes harder to translate grammatical constructions the more distant the TL is from the source language (henceforth the SL). Between the ostensibly cognate languages of English and German, the difference in genders can challenge translators, as gendered nouns in German add another layer of subconscious meaning to a text which cannot be inconspicuously translated into English. Mark Twain, in his essay *The Awful German Language*, queries the sense in a system of gendering whereby a girl, *Mädchen*, takes the neuter gender whilst a turnip, *Rübe*, is female;

Gretchen: Where is the turnip?

Wilhelm: She has gone to the kitchen.

Gretchen: Where is the accomplished and beautiful English maiden?

Wilhelm: It has gone to the opera. (LeMaster and Wilson, 2011)

Whilst Twain highlights a comical quirk to English speakers, he proves that gender and other grammatical disparities can create a stumbling block for translators; one can omit the gender, although this inevitably creates a loss, alternatively footnotes could provide contextual information, but risk distracting the reader from the content of the text.

Having explored the ways in which translation is integral to communication, from literature to instruction manuals, it is evident that sources fall into one of two categories depending upon their purpose. Instruction manuals, maps and restaurant menus are read for comprehension, a greater layer of meaning is seldom sought from such sources; books, films and poetry are usually read for their deeper meaning- although this less tangible purpose of reading is harder to define, it could be described as reading for expression or a deeper connection with the source.

Whilst conferences and diplomatic encounters might seem to blur the lines between translation for comprehension and translation for expression, one purpose will prevail; in a discussion about strategy or action, comprehension is most important, whereas a meeting about relations might prioritise expression. Naturally, no translation is entirely oriented towards either comprehension or expression, but this concept helps establish the purpose or a source, which indicates which approach should be adopted when translating. John Dryden, the 17<sup>th</sup> century poet and translator, summarised his knowledge of translation into translating by 'metaphrase', 'paraphrase' or 'imitation' (Reynolds, 2016).

Dryden's 'metaphrase' meant translating on a word for word basis between languages, with little regard for the text as the sum of its constituent parts. This detailed approach lends itself to sources where comprehension is the objective. In such sources, the eloquence of the language is less important, provided the necessary information is conveyed.

'Paraphrase', by contrast, considers the author and original text without following their exact words, but aims to remain faithful to the meaning of the text instead. By nature, 'paraphrasing' is a subjective exercise, since the translator's interpretation of the original text is reflected onto the translation, however this is not comparable to Dryden's third form of translation, 'imitation'.

Dryden acknowledges that whether 'imitation' should qualify as a form of translation could be contested, since it is defined as dabbling in parts or ideas from a text when the 'translator' chooses to but basing the translation only loosely upon the original. It seems unlikely, at present, that 'imitation' would be acknowledged as translation, however, Andrés Trapiello's attempt to 'translate' Don Quixote into modern Spanish might be viewed as a form of 'imitation' since he seemingly rewrote the same story (Flood, 2015). The boundary between 'paraphrase' and 'imitation' can seem ambiguous. When translating for expression, 'paraphrase' is arguably

the most effective translation technique, and there exist various tools which enhance the process of 'paraphrasing'.

Where the language pair is culturally and linguistically distant, 'paraphrasing' forces the translator to deviate further from the original text. Faced with cultural differences in a source, the translator must choose between 'domestication' and 'foreignization'.

'Domestication' involves adapting the translation to shift the original text closer to the reader's culture (Reynolds, 2016). For example, Ruyl's Malay translation of the bible replaced the original fig tree with a banana tree (Soesilo, 2013) because readers, having never encountered a fig tree, might have been distracted by this foreign concept in the text. Where a detail is relatively inconsequential to the plot, 'domestication' lets the translator smooth over any cultural differences which are likely only to confuse the reader rather than contribute positively to their reading experience.

'Foreignization' involves retaining unfamiliar concepts or syntax in a text, thus bringing the reader closer to the writer's culture. 'Foreignization' is desirable when the foreign concept is central to the plot or to the writer's intention, therefore, when it adds depth which enhances the reading experience. Ezra Pound translated part of a poem by Guido Cavalcanti as follows:

Chi è questa che vèn, ch'ogn'om la mira  
Che fa tremar di chiaritate l'are  
E mena seco Amor, s' che parlare  
Null'omo pote, ma ciascun sospira? (Cavalcanti, 2011)

Who is she coming, whom all gaze upon,  
Who makes the whole air tremulous with light,  
And leadeth with her Love, so no man hath  
Power of speech, but each one sigheth? (Pound, 1963)

Pound adopts a literal approach comparable to 'foreignization', retaining as many characteristics of the original as possible, whereas the English poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti translated the passage differently:

Who is she coming, whom all gaze upon,  
Who makes the air all tremulous with light,  
And at whose side is Love himself? That none  
Dare speak, but each man's sighs are infinite. (Rossetti, 1982)

Translator Lawrence Veneti (1995) asserts that Pound translates the "mena seco Amor" more literally, it equates roughly to "she leads Love with herself", whilst Rossetti simplifies the syntax to sound more fluent in English.

This illustration of 'foreignization' versus 'domestication' demonstrates a spectrum of translation, whereby a translation can be syntactically closer to either the TL or SL. This alludes to the 'no man's land' between languages (Reynolds, 2016) whereby writing isn't entirely in the TL or SL but lies between the two. Since the written forms of Chinese and Japanese are broadly similar, Classical Chinese texts were made intelligible to Japanese readers during the Tokugawa Shogunate (between 1603-1868) through the process of *kanbun-kundoku*, which roughly translates to 'Chinese text, Japanese reading'. The process involved scholars marking texts to indicate the Japanese arrangement of characters, or sometimes rewriting the characters in Japanese order and adding pronunciation signs. The end results were texts which straddled both languages.

Other methods exist to bridge languages; in an increasingly globalised world, loanwords appear more frequently in every language. The New York Times (Corbett, 2009) noted that the use of loanword *schadenfreude* (from German) in its pages proliferated from being used once in 1985 to 62 uses in 2008. Where a word has connotations in one language which cannot easily be translated into another, a loanword retains these connotations, providing new vocabulary in the TL.

Whilst the expansion of its vocabulary inevitably creates new possibilities for expression, translation can also spark originality. The analogy of “translation loss” (Davie, 2012), based on energy loss, states that no translation is 100% efficient, as no mechanism can be 100% efficient. The analogy implies that ‘perfect’ translation is impossible, however, whilst “translation loss” is inevitable, translation can also create new literature and new ideas. Through literary translation, the translator reflects their perception of the text onto it, thus altering the original and forging new literature.

The inevitability of imperfections in translation shouldn’t dissuade translators, for the inability to achieve a definitive translation is testament to the artistry which the task demands and serves as a reminder that translation will evolve to reflect the world and its present needs. The conclusion that ‘perfect’ translation is impossible would imply that the translator can never be entirely invisible. That the translator will leave their mark on a translation is as certain as the fact that foreign languages are not mutually intelligible; if linear translation was possible between all languages, each language would be devoid of the syntactic and semantic individuality which has facilitated its survival.

By evaluating the different obstacles faced by translators and the tools which enhance the process of translation, it is apparent that invisibility in translation, whilst desirable, is a simplistic and ultimately futile aim. This conclusion doesn’t mean that remaining faithful to the author and original text shouldn’t be the translator’s first priority; a failure to do so would rightfully distinguish the translator as a traitor. However, selecting the best method to produce a faithful translation falls under the translator’s discretion as they must decide whether their loyalty lies with the words of the text or with their own interpretation of the writer’s meaning.

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