International Yearbook for Hermeneutics

Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik

Focus: Logos
Schwerpunkt: Logos

17 · 2018

Mohr Siebeck

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edited by

Günter Figal and Bernhard Zimmermann

in cooperation with

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ISBN 978-3-16-156244-0 / eISBN 978-3-16-156245-7
DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-156245-7
ISSN 2196-534X / eISSN 2568-8391

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at http://dnb.dnb.de.

The book was typeset by Martin Fischer in Tübingen using Bembo Antiqua and OdysseaU, printed by Laupp & Göbel in Nehren on non-aging paper and bound by Buchbinderei Nädele in Nehren.

Printed in Germany.

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The Play of Translation

by

John Sallis (Boston College)

In writing about translation, it will not be easy to keep things from getting tangled. In particular, it will not be easy to keep the discourse itself from getting mixed up with its topic. It will not be easy to produce a discourse capable of remaining simply distinct, completely apart, from what the discourse is about. In other words, it will not be easy to write about translation without getting entangled in translation, without getting caught up in translating translation. For even simply to explain what translation is, to interpret the meaning of the word, is in a sense – in one of the primary senses of the word – to translate. One will not succeed in extricating oneself completely from the intricacies of translation; that is, one will be inescapably drawn into the entanglement of translating translation, even as one also draws away, distancing oneself from this doubling, seeking to disentangle oneself.

The pretense of a discourse on translation that would be uncontaminated by translation cannot, then, be sustained. Forthrightness would dictate acknowledging the entanglement and inscribing the discourse within it.

Yet, even such an inscription will prove incapable of stabilizing the sense of translation, of delimiting it by enframing it within firm limits. Its sense will overreach such would-be limits, and slippage and mutation will set in.

For the most part translation is undertaken without reflection on the structure by which it is determined. One simply goes about translating, directing one's attention to the original expression while weighing various expressions by which it might be translated. Yet, even in this case, a certain understanding of the nature of translation is tacitly operative. But what is fundamentally involved in the transition from an expression to its translation remains unconsidered. One simply focuses on carrying out the transition and producing a translation that can be acknowledged – that will be acknowledged by oneself and others – as being appropriate. Or one might aspire to fashion a translation that exceeds being merely appropriate or that proves to be appropriate to a higher degree.

The transition constitutive of translation is seldom prescribed in advance and in its entirety in such a way that carrying it out would be a mere mechanical process. On the contrary, in most cases there is operative a playfulness – for instance, a wavering between various possibilities, an openness eliciting others, summoning the possible to such an extent that this playfulness shapes the course of the translation, rendering its formation tentative and exploratory rather than simply definitive. As with all sorts of play, the player tends to lose himself in the play, to be taken up into it rather than exercising mastery over it; thus, the very structure of play – and of translation as play – is such that it resists being reduced to a subjective activity in full control, exercising mastery as though all that emerged in the play were merely an object gradually being constituted by the subject. Insofar as it is playful, translation follows a course that is not prescribed; rather, the player must submit to a movement of to-and-fro by which this course is laid out only as it is also being followed. While, to be sure, texts do not translate themselves, neither is translation produced by spontaneous acts of a detached subject. Translating takes place between passive and active, and, if such were intact in modern Western languages, would best be expressed in the middle voice.

The delimitation that was to become the classical concept of translation was first formulated within the orbit of Greek philosophy. To the extent that Western thought remained within this orbit – or at least never entirely escaped it – the classical concept continued to govern the understanding of translation throughout much of the history of philosophy. In order to thematize the classical determination, it will be expedient first of all to identify the specific questions to which the classical concept constitutes a response. Here already, in the transition to these questions and the classical response to them, translation will itself necessarily undergo translation.

To translate something is to convey it across an interval. Such, at least, is the word's most general signification. This signification is itself conveyed – that is, translated – across a certain historical interval by the word's etymology. Its Latin root *translatus* was used as the past participle of *transfero*, to carry or bear across an interval. This word, *transfero*, was in turn the translation of the Greek μεταφέρω – hence the connection, still intact, between translation and metaphor.

One of the specific things that can be conveyed across an interval is meaning, as when the meaning of one word is carried over to another. If the interval is that between two languages, then such conveyance constitutes translation in the ordinary sense of translating something in one language into the words of another language. If, on the other hand, the interval lies within a single language, then translation consists in a transfer of meaning

between synonyms. Jakobson calls this intralingual translation, in distinction from interlingual translation, which conveys meaning from one language to another.[1] In this connection there is an opening through which translation would come to coincide with all thinking by which a disclosive move is carried out from one expression to another, as when, for example, the transition is made from the word *object* to the expression *that which stands over against a subject*. By letting the concept of translation extend to this degree, it would be brought to include virtually all movement thoughtfully carried out from one expression to another. In this sense it could, then, be said that thinking is translation.

Translation cannot be separated from measure. If a translation spans the difference between two languages, then the transference across the interval separating the expression in one language from its translation into the other language must be governed by a measure by which it can be determined whether the translation is suitable or not, even whether it can properly be designated as a translation. The measure of a translation is its truth; the measure is, specifically, whether – or to what degree – the translation is *true to* the original, true to the discourse that it is put forth as translating. Yet, what does it mean to be true to a discourse, to a written text or to the spoken word? What does it mean to be *true to* anything? As one can be true to a discourse, thereby producing a good translation, one can also, in quite another context, be true to a friend. Thus, in its most general denotation, to be true to something does not simply mean corresponding to it, as the dominant historical determination of truth would prescribe. In being true to a friend, one does not correspond to him (whatever sense – if any at all – correspondence would have in this case), but rather, in a certain specific sense, one responds to him. One is true to a friend by respecting, in word and deed, all that is entailed by the particular – in fact, singular – friendship. To be sure, the truth of a translation requires in some respect that it correspond to the original, that it be like the original. Yet, one cannot but ask: What sense does correspondence have in this case? Correspondence in what respect? How can a linguistic unit in one language (a word, a sentence, etc.) be equivalent to – or at least similar to – a unit in another language? Yet, in whatever manner these questions are resolved, it is imperative to grant that in what are taken as the very best translations there is also an almost ineffable quality akin to the respect belonging to a circle of friendship.

It is to the questions concerning the measure, the truth, of translation that the classical determination of translation responds. This determination is set

[1] Roman Jacobson, Language in Literature, edited by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1987, p. 429.

out in Plato's *Critias*. The various moments of this determination and the full context in which it is developed have been elaborated elsewhere and here need only to be retraced in outline.[2]

The theme of translation is taken up in the course of a story, told by Critias, about the original Athens of nine thousand years ago in its struggle against the aggression of Atlantis. Critias explains that the story had been handed down originally from Solon, who, in turn, had heard it while traveling in Egypt. In the city of Saïs the story had been preserved in writing, not, however, in Greek, but in the foreign language spoken in that foreign land. Thus, in bringing the story back to Athens, Solon was faced with the problem of translation.

Critias describes how Solon dealt with this problem. The description may be translated as follows: "As Solon was planning to make use of the story in his own poetry, he found, on investigating the force of names, that those Egyptians who had first written them down had translated them into their own voice."[3] Solon's recognition that the story had been preserved in translation was the result of his investigation of the force of the names involved. What is the force (δύναμις) of a name, of a word (ὄνομα)? The force of a word lies in its capacity to announce something or someone, to announce that which it names, thereby making it present in a certain way. This way of making present is to be distinguished from the way in which sense-perception (αἴσθησις) makes present. Because names bring things to presence, thereby rendering them manifest, they are eminently capable, especially when they are preserved in writing, of serving as the repository of memory.

Solon's investigation of the force of the names belonging to the translation of the story would, then, have taken the form of a recovery of their capacity to make manifest and thereby of that which they served to make manifest. Activating the names, putting their force in force, Solon could then carry through the translation into Greek. Thus, Critias' narrative continues: "So he himself, in turn, retrieved the thought [διάνοια] of each name and leading it into our own voice wrote it out."[4]

Here for the first time the basic structure of translation is determined. It is an operation of putting in force the manifestive force of words set in a foreign voice, of doing so in such a way as to retrieve the thought they make manifest, so as then to lead that thought into one's own voice. This inaugural, still proto-classical determination later comes to be stabilized, indeed simplified, into the classical determination, which subsequently will

[2] Cf. John Sallis, On Translation, Bloomington 2001, pp. 51–62.
[3] Plato, Critias, 113a.
[4] Plato, Critias, 113b.

govern, for the most part, the understanding of translation. According to the schema of this determination, translation consists in the movement from an element or expression in one language to a corresponding element or expression in the other language; this movement is carried out by way of circulation through the signification, the meaning. Translation is a circuit running from one language through its meaning to another language in which there is restitution of this meaning. The truth of translation in the sense of correspondence is also determined: a translation corresponds to its original if it has the same meaning. The measure of translation would thus be restitution of meaning.

And yet, is it only the restitution of meaning that provides the measure of translation? Is a translation of a poem – assuming that poetry can be translated – solely a matter of its meaning? Are there not more nearly ineffable elements that are essential to most translations? Not even Cicero, with whom the classical determination has become firmly established, limits translation to the circulation through meaning or thought; rather, he insists that it is also essential that the figures in which the thoughts are expressed also be carried over to the translation of a text.

The classical determination of translation remains in force in modernity, indeed throughout most of modernity. Yet, there is expressed again and again a sense that true translation requires more than merely the circulation through meaning, more than the mere restitution of denotation. This sentiment is explicit, for example, in the expressed self-understanding of certain translators of classical works. Among these is Thomas Taylor, who, near the outset of modernity, translated not only the *Timaeus* and the *Critias* but also Proclus' rich and massive commentary on the *Timaeus*. In the latter, Taylor concludes his Introduction with a brief discussion of the translation as such. He writes: "With respect to the following translation, I have only to observe, that I have endeavored to the utmost of my ability to unite in it faithfulness with perspicuity, and to preserve the manner as well as the matter of the original."[5] Here he attests that his translation is guided by two primary concerns. On the one hand, it is meant to be faithful, that is, true to the original. By doing so, he will preserve what he terms the matter of the original, that is, the thoughts, the meanings, as they are woven into the original text and must be rewoven in the production of the translation. In this concern Taylor reiterates the classical determination in its most direct form. Yet, on the other hand, he is concerned to exercise perspicuity, to discern both what, in particular, faithfulness requires and what needs to be

[5] Thomas Taylor, The Commentaries of Proclus on the Timaeus of Plato, translated by Thomas Taylor, London 1820, p. vii.

retained beyond the bounds of faithfulness in the strict sense. This excess he designates by the term "manner," contrasting it with matter. By manner he means the stylistic and rhetorical elements of the text.

Yet, immediately following his expression of these two concerns, Taylor observes that "the original abounds with errors, not of a trifling, but of the most important nature."[6] These errors, he explains are of such magnitude that they materially affect the sense, that is, obscure the meaning of the text. His reference of course is not to errors committed by Proclus but those corruptions that have crept into the text as it was handed down and that now abound in what must nonetheless serve as the original from which the translation will have been prepared. Thus, Taylor confesses that he has entered "upwards of eleven hundred *necessary* emendations" – emendations that, he insists, "the sense indubitably demands." By proceeding in this way, Taylor has in effect altered the classical determination of translation: rather than simply circling from the original through the meanings to the translation, he has circled back from the meanings to the original in order to restore the true original; only then does he proceed on the circuit from the restored original through the meanings to the translation. Being true to the original thus acquires a double sense, its restitution regressing from the meaning before then progressing through the meaning to the translation.

Finally, Taylor describes his translation as a gift by which he imparts to others the treasures of ancient wisdom. Yet, it is not a gift meant for everyone; that gift was already bestowed in antiquity in the form of Proclus' original work in the original language. Taylor, on the other hand, imparts this treasure to those who share his native tongue. The gift is beneficent, for it delivers the ancient treasures not only to those who lack the knowledge of the ancient language but also – so it seems – to those who, though capable of reading the original in the original, somehow benefit from reading it in their "native tongue." It is a gift to all who share Taylor's native tongue or who will inherit that tongue in the future. Just as the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle was a good imparted by divinity, so, says Taylor, "I could not confer a more real benefit on the present age and posterity than by a dissemination of it in my native tongue."[7] One could say that Taylor lets Proclus speak English so that he can speak to all who share this native tongue.

The Preface to Alexander Pope's celebrated translation of *The Iliad* begins with invention: "Homer is universally allow'd to have had the greatest *Invention* of any writer whatever."[8] The intent of the word *invention* is not to

[6] Taylor, Commentaries, p. vii.

[7] Taylor, Commentaries, p. viii.

[8] Homer, The Iliad of Homer, translated by Alexander Pope, New York1996. All subsequent citations from Pope are taken from the Preface to his translation.

describe what the poet produces; it is not the poetic work that constitutes *an* invention (as we must say, inserting the article). Pope's reference is simply to invention, not to *an* invention, nor to *the* invention produced by the poet. Neither is it the intent of the word to designate the activity, the productive labor, by which the poet brings forth his work. Rather, *invention* is the name of that which is the antecedent condition by which it first becomes possible to engage in genuinely poetic activity and thereby to produce a truly poetic work. Invention is the gift, itself unaccountable, that allows one to become a great and fruitful poet. Invention is genius or at least is the distinguishing mark of genius. Capitalizing both words, Pope writes that it is "Invention that in different degrees distinguishes all great Genius's."

Pope declares that in his translation he endeavors to show how Homer's vast *Invention* surpasses that of any other poet. This demonstration is to be carried out in all the constituent parts of *The Iliad*. Yet, neither Homer's invention as such, his genius, nor the poetic composition in which he engages can be directly displayed. All that can be displayed in the original and imported into the translation are the effects of his invention, that it makes "his manners more *lively* and *strongly marked*, his speeches more *affecting* and *transported*, his sentiments more *warm* and sublime, his images and descriptions more *full* and *animated*, his expression more *rais'd* and *daring*, and his numbers more *rapid* and *various.*" Such are, then, the qualities that attest to Homer's invention, his genius, and these are qualities that must be carried over to the translation if it is to be true to the original. Yet, reference to these qualities provides no hint whatsoever as to how Pope's translation is to carry out the progression that the classical concept considers primary, the circling from original to its meaning and from the meaning to the translation.

However, once Pope turns from the theme of invention and the qualities of the poetic work that springs from it to his treatment of his translation and indeed of translation in general, the question of truth in the strict sense comes into play. The translator, he says, is to avoid "wilful omissions or contractions," so as to present the original "entire and unmaim'd." Yet, such a presentation cannot be a literal translation any more than it can be a paraphrase. Passage from original to translation is necessarily limited, for there are features that cannot literally be carried over along with, as integral to, the meaning, features that are not simply drawn across the semantic interval. These features must be recreated by the translator. Pope mentions two such features, diction and versification, and declares that only these are the "proper province" of the translator.

In the case of diction, there are two characteristics with which the translator of Homer must deal, the compound epithets and the repetitions. Pope observes that many of Homer's compound epithets cannot be rendered in

English without violating the purity of the language; there are others that "slide easily of themselves into an *English-compound*" or that – as in the case of *cloud-compelling Jove* – have been sanctioned by poets and as a result are familiar. On the other hand, those irreducibly foreign to English must either be expressed in a single word (if possible) or translated by a circumlocution. As an example of the latter, Pope cites the epithet εἰνοσίφυλλος, which, applied to a mountain, would appear ridiculous if translated literally as *leaf-shaking*, but assumes a majestic form if rendered as: *The lofty mountain shakes his waving woods*. Pope attests that there are many repetitions that are not accommodated to our ear; these are to be placed only where they enhance the beauty of a passage. In properly placing them, the translator show "his fancy and his judgment."

As to the other feature with which the translator of Homer must deal, versification, Pope has little to say except that Homer created exquisite beauties by perpetually applying the sound to the sense." Pope is content to attest that he has "endeavor'd at this beauty."

Thus, Pope details the various supplements that the translator must create and install within the translation of the poem, supplements that in the translation replace, make up for, all those features that are not transported along with the meaning, all those features that detach themselves from the meaning and that, so detached, cannot be taken up into a transposition that would carry them over, fully intact, to the translation.

Pope offers, finally, a measure by which to determine the limit beyond which the translator is not to take liberties in rendering the original. He writes: "I know no liberties one ought to take, but those which are necessary for transfusing the spirit of the original, and supporting the poetical style of the translation." What the translator must carry over is not simply the meaning, not the literal meaning, but the spirit that animates the meaning; and then, casting his glance back at the nonsemantic features of the original, he must create within the translation the supplements that replace those features. Pope expresses this measure in a single word: "the *fire* of the Poem is what a translator should principally regard."

Can it be said, then – as has again and again been said – that translation inevitably involves less? In some instances at least, the literal meaning of an expression in the original may not be reproducible in the language into which it is being translated. And yet, if the translator succeeds in carrying over the spirit of the expression, this may well constitute a restitution of the meaning that is superior to any that could be achieved by way of an allegedly literal translation. Even further, there are some instances in which the spirit of a semantic element turns out to be expressed more expansively in the translation than in the original – with the result that there is actually

a gain in meaning, not a loss.[9] Yet, no matter how complete the transfer of meaning may be, the nonsemantic features that Pope identifies – most notably, diction and versification – will almost certainly be lost in the translation. But whether this loss simply renders the translation inferior to the original depends on the fancy and judgment of the translator; it depends on whether the supplements that he produces counterbalance what has been lost.

In addition to the supplements identified by Pope, there is another that in many instances is required. Paradoxically it involves a move that, even if the restitution of meaning is perfect, supervenes in such a way as to introduce distortion into the translation – or at least what, according to the classical concept of translation, would constitute distortion. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer stresses that even if a translation replicates the meaning of the original, it typically has to transpose the meaning into a different context. He writes: "The meaning is to be preserved, but, since it is to be understood in a new language world, it must establish its validity therein in a new way." This transposition Gadamer characterizes as a form of interpretation. He concludes: "Thus every translation is already interpretation."[10] In a later text Gadamer puts it still more radically, emphasizing the distortive effect of the insertion of the translation into another language world. He says: "Every translation is like a betrayal."[11] This formulation indicates that the introduction of interpretation into all translation has the effect of submitting translation to its extreme limitation, at least as long as translation continues to be understood according to the classical determination. Interpretation must come into play in order to establish in a new language world the meaning of the text translated; and yet in adapting it to that new world, the interpretive translation inevitably betrays the meaning of the original. It becomes ever more apparent that full restitution of sense has virtually no sense, and it is in this sense that Gadamer's hermeneutics of translation drives the classical determination on toward the limit at which it begins to unravel completely.

Hegel was quite aware that the world – and hence the language world – of the early nineteenth century differed to an incalculable degree from that of Greece in the classical era. Nonetheless, he was also aware of the enormous force of the words and expressions that were shaped in and through the thought of Plato and Aristotle, such force that their manifestive capacity had largely endured even up to the era of German Idealism. It was this awareness

[9] Cf. Sallis, On Translation, pp. 93–97.

[10] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hermeneutik I. Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik, sixth edition, Gesammelte Werke (hereinafter: GW) Volume 1, Tübingen 1990, pp. 387–88.

[11] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Lesen ist wie Übersetzen (1989), in: Ästhetik und Poetik I. Kunst als Aussage, GW 8, Tübingen 1993, p. 279.

that prompted Hegel to adopt numerous Greek words, translating them into German, into his language world, yet in such a way that, taken in their respective contexts, it is quite transparent that they are direct translations from the Greek.

And yet, with Hegel, it is not just a matter of interpreting these words so as to bring them, in their translated form, into accord with the language world of early nineteenth-century Germany. Rather, it is a matter of a thinking that recovers what was said and thought in these words, that recaptures their force, and that draws this force into the thinking that Hegel undertakes – not, then, just interpretation, perhaps not interpretation at all, but thinking, a thinking that reanimates the Greek words and releases their force.

In the Preface to the second edition of the *Science of Logic* – the *Vorrede*, which is properly a beginning before the beginning – Hegel writes: "The forms of thought are, in the first instance, displayed and stored in human *language*." The reference that he then makes to thinking as that "which distinguished man from the beasts"[12] is indicative that it is the task of thinking to recover its own forms from the language in which they are stored.

Among the Greek words from which, in his thinking, Hegel undertakes to recover, for his thinking, the thinking stored in those words, the following examples may be mentioned: ἐπιστήμη, translated as *Wissen* or *Wissenschaft*; ἄπειρον as *unendlich*; ἐκφαίνω as *scheinen*; ποῖον as *Qualität* or *Bestimmtheit*. In some instances, as with ποῖον, the transposition is mediated by the Latin translation, though for the most part, Hegel's retrieval reaches back to the Greek, not merely to the Latin.

Yet, there are other cases in which it is not a matter of such appropriative translation from the Greek but of fully exploiting the possibilities sheltered within German words. Referring to the many advantages that in a certain respect German has over other modern languages, Hegel writes: "some of its words even possess the further peculiarity of having not only different but opposite meanings so that one cannot fail to recognize a speculative spirit of the language in them. It can delight a thinker to come across such words."[13] What is called for is to free this speculative spirit so that such opposite meanings can be brought to animate philosophical language as such. Here it would be primarily a matter, not of translation in any classical sense, but of liberation.

It goes without saying that in Hegel's text the most prominent and significant word of this kind is *Aufheben*, so much so that at the end of the first

[12] G. W. F. Hegel, Wissenschaft der Logik 1, Theorie-Werkausgabe (hereinafter: Werke) Volume 5, Frankfurt am Main1969, p. 19.

[13] Hegel, Wissenschaft der Logik, Werke 5, p. 20.

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