



WHAT IS TRANSLATION?

Etymologically, translating means “carrying across”; meaning is transported out of one language and into another:

Source Language:¹ Cuatro ojos ven más que dos.

Target Language:¹ Two heads are better than one.

Look at the examples above. At what level is meaning “carried across”? Has the translator translated words or ideas?

The mental processes involved in translation are extraordinarily complex and as yet are not fully understood. Linguistic scientists believe that the transfer of meaning takes place at a fairly deep level they call the “kernel” level. The mind, after analyzing the message in the original, or source language, seems to search for an appropriate place at which to make the “crossing.” Eugene Nida likens the process to a hiker looking for a place to ford a stream: he may have to travel a considerable distance upstream or downstream to find the place where the crossing can be made most efficiently. In another analogy, Nida describes the process of transfer as packing for a trip:

One does not really translate words but bundles of componential features. The words may be regarded essential as vehicles for carrying across the component of meaning. In fact, the words may be likened to suitcases carrying various articles of clothing. It really does not make much difference which articles are packed in which suitcase. What counts is that the clothes arrive at the destination in the best possible condition, i.e., with the least damage. What matters is not the particular words which carry the componential features, but the fact that the correct componential features are lexically transported.

Language Structure and Translation, p. 91²

An idea that travels comfortably in one language in a suitcase called “noun” may travel more comfortably in another in a suitcase called “adjective,” and so forth:

S.L. (Source language): Tenía hambre.

T.L. (Target language): He was hungry.

¹The “source” language is the language of the original statement or text. The “target” language is the language into which the translation is being done.

²The complete bibliographic reference for all works cited in the text is found in “Reference Tools” at the end of this part of the text.

S.L. Me quedan veinte dólares.

T.L. I have twenty dollars left.

Can you think of additional examples to illustrate this idea? How can we decide what to put in which "suitcase"?

TRANSLATION IS FOR THE READER

A distinction is often made between translating, which is usually done in writing, and interpreting, which is done orally. But let us use the term translating in its broader sense for a moment in order to consider what is actually occurring during the process of transfer of meaning. In a general sense, we could say that everyone is a translator of sorts. Octavio Paz reminds us that "learning to speak is learning to translate: whenever a child asks his mother for the meaning of a word, he is really asking her to translate the term into his language" (*Traducción y literalidad*, p. 7).

If she tells him that *pachyderm* means *elephant* or *He pulled the wool over her eyes* means *He fooled her*, and he understands, the translation has been successful. We are all familiar with this type of translation within a language, and it is a useful model for us to look at as we begin to analyze the process of translation between languages. When the mother "translates" for the child, she adjusts her language to his. She anticipates the impression her words will have on the child and finds equivalents for terms he might not understand. In the same way a teenager might "translate" words like "wasted" or "crashed" when these are used in ways unintelligible to parents. An important axiom of translating is in evidence in these examples: *translation is for the reader; it exists for the reader* —not for the author, not for posterity, certainly not for the translator. If the reader understood the language of the original statement, there would be no need for the translation. The test of the translation, then, is not the perfection of the written text so much as the reader's response to it. Accordingly, translators must constantly try to anticipate the reader's responses so that they can make all appropriate adjustments.

WHAT IS A FAITHFUL TRANSLATION?

We make a very wide range of adjustments even when we are translating within a language. Your doctor may tell you have "hives," rather than "urticaria," which is the precise technical term he or she would use in speaking to another doctor. Your English friends may remember to say "gas" instead of "petrol," or "baby carriage" instead of "pram," when speaking to Americans. Argentines may say "abrigo" and "falda" instead of "tapado" and "pollera" when speaking to non-Argentines, just as Mexicans remember that "tortilla" means something quite different to a Spaniard and to a Chilean.

North Americans when speaking Spanish may remember to prefix *Don* or *Doña* to the first name of a respected older person in a way that is not common in English. These common-sense adjustments for variations in knowledge, experience, regional usage and social custom are also part of the translation process. The final test of a translation, as we have said, is the total effect it has upon the reader. The American Translators Association defines the translator's duty in the following way:

It shall be the duty of every translator to translate with the greatest fidelity and accuracy he can command, endeavoring always to give his readers and audience the impression they would have if they could hear or read the original.

A.T.A. Code of Ethical Practices
(See next chapter.)

There can be no absolute definition of a "faithful translation"; the concept can only be defined with respect to its effect upon the prime or intended reader.

WHO IS THE PRIME READER?

Some types of legal texts have a number of readers of varying levels of knowledge and experience. Which reader should the translator keep in mind? Whose needs take precedence, the client's for example, or the attorney's? Think this over very carefully, for it has an important bearing on your work: *technical materials*, such as legal documents, are, first and foremost, *communications between experts*: they are written by professionals and directed to other professionals. The prescription your doctor writes for your medication is fundamentally a communication between himself and the pharmacist. It is written in a specific way, according to rigidly established formula, to guarantee an absolute minimum of confusion with regard to the composition and preparation of the medication. If you as patient happen to be able to understand the prescription, well and good. But you are not the prime reader of the prescription; the pharmacist is, and his need to understand specific directions takes precedence over your curiosity to know what the prescription "says." Your medical needs are better served when the communication between physician and pharmacist takes place with maximum safeguards, and this often means that sophisticated, technical language must be used.

The prescription is analogous to a legal instrument such as a contract, a will or a birth certificate. These are essentially communications between professionals — they were written by attorneys or experts in the law for others similarly prepared. They are written in language that is extraordinarily precise, formulaic and exact, for the purpose of protecting the individuals involved. The prime reader of professional, technical communications, then, is *not* ordinarily the layman (the holder of the prescription or the birth certificate) but *another professional equipped to understand technical language*. The translator's duty is to give *this reader* the same impression he would have if he could read the original in his own language. A Spanish word like "urticaria" should be rendered *urticaria* — not "hives" — in a technical translation.

Obviously, the client's need to know what a document "says" is also very great and should by no means be overlooked. Explaining the meaning of legal terms in simple language so that clients can understand them clearly may be an important part of your work in a legal environment. But in translating documents, the translator should remember that the prime reader is another member of the legal profession, not the client; precision and accuracy are top priorities.

Not all the translations you will do in a legal environment are of legal documents. You will be frequently called upon to translate letters, newspaper articles, brochures, materials for tenants associations and the like. The prime readers of these materials are not likely to be legal experts; to facilitate communication, you may have to make a number of adjustments. Correctly identifying the prime reader and keeping that person's responses constantly in mind are prime requisites for faithfulness in translation.

TRADUTTORE, TRADITTORE: GAINS AND LOSSES

How close can we actually come to "giving the reader the same impression he would have if he could read the original in his own language"? The answer to this question is enormously complex, quite beyond the scope of this introduction, but even the beginning translator must begin to think about all that is implied by the phrase "the same impression." This "impression" is so difficult to achieve that many languages have a formula similar to the Italian "Traduttore, traditore" — "Translator, traitor." What is "lost" in translation is lamentable; and what is unintentionally gained is every bit as worrisome. Even at the level of the single word, it is so difficult to find exact equivalents that some loss or gain of meaning is almost inevitable. If we translate "siesta" as "nap," have we lost or gained meaning? Examine the following pairs of "equivalents" for meaning loss or gain:

SOURCE LANGUAGE

hobby
girlfriend
pet
sobremesa
patio (Sp.)
plaza (Sp.)
niñera

TARGET LANGUAGE

pasatiempo
novia
mascota
tabletalk
patio (Eng.)
plaza (Eng.)
baby sitter

It is rare that the so-called equivalents the dictionaries give us coincide exactly. Different cultures structure experience differently, and these differences are reflected directly in language. *Novia*, since it also means *fiancée* and *bride*, inevitably says more than the English *girlfriend*. The consequences of this phenomenon are obvious: if serious misunderstandings are not to occur, the translator must tax his or her ingenuity to correct, to compensate for these gains and losses.

CONNOTATION

The *connotation* of a word (the feelings we associate with it) is an important part of its meaning. Sometimes the denotative range (what the word refers to) of each of a pair of "equivalents" is very similar, but the connotation is so different that their effect is entirely different in the two languages. What are the differences in *connotation* in the following pairs?

SOURCE LANGUAGE

¡Jesús!
entrañas
Christmas
siesta
sereno

TARGET LANGUAGE

Jesus!
entrails
Navidad
nap
night watchman

Unlike the scientific, technical vocabulary, everyday language is charged with emotional association, and these associations often defy translation; the translator does not translate words, but ideas, feelings, desires and the intentions that lie behind these, as Vázquez Ayora explains in *Introducción a la traductología* (p. 55).

NATURALNESS OF EXPRESSION

Another factor that affects the overall impression created by the translation is the naturalness of expression. The native speaker through long experience with the language has acquired a set of expectations with respect to usage. Notice the various small adjustments the translator of the following passage has made in order to insure a natural-sounding translation:

SOURCE LANGUAGE**ALIMENTOS, DEFINICIÓN DE**

Se entiende por alimentos todo lo que es indispensable para el sustento, habitación, vestido y asistencia médica, según la posición de la familia.

Los alimentos comprenden también la educación e instrucción del alimentista, cuando es menor de edad.

TARGET LANGUAGE

SUPPORT, DEFINED

Support is understood to be all that is indispensable for maintenance, housing clothing and medical attention, according to the social position of the family.

Support also includes the education and instruction of the person supported when he is a minor.

Laws of Puerto Rico
(Civil Code, 1930, #142)

"Alimento" obviously means "support," rather than "food"; accordingly "maintenance" is a better choice than "sustenance," which comes first to mind; "housing" is more natural than "habitation," "medical attention" more natural than "medical assistance," and so on. "Social" is inserted before "position" to round out in English a concept that was clear enough in Spanish: we are left with the slightly redundant "education and instruction" because there is no English equivalent for the broader meaning of "educación." When choices like these are made carefully, with an eye to natural usage, the resulting translation should sound as if it had been originally written in the target language.

SET PHRASES

Every language is a storehouse of ready-made forms, whole strings of words already linked up by habit and usage, phrases that lie ready to be used for certain specific purposes.

Compare the following translations of a proverb:

S.L. Adonde fueres, haz lo que vieres.

T.L. (a) Wherever you go, do what you see.

T.L. (b) When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

Which is the best translation? Word for word, (a) is certainly very close to the original, but it fails to give us the impression the original gives: we need and expect a *proverb* here. Since (b) satisfies this *formal requirement*, we prefer it to (a); even though the words are different, we feel that the meaning is the same, and, more importantly, that the meaning is expressed in the same way—in the form of proverb—as in the original. Set phrases or *frases hechas*—greetings, closings, stock comparisons, clichés, proverbs, sayings—since they "preexist," so to speak, in the source language, need to be rendered by such preexisting forms in the target language.

S.L.

Son iguales como dos
gotas de agua.

En boca cerrada no
entran moscas.

Llovió a cántaros.

T.L.

(a) They are as similar
as two drops of water.

(b) They are as alike as
two peas in a pod.

(a) Flies do not enter
a closed mouth.

(b) Silence is golden.

(a) It rained by the
pitcherful.

(b) It rained cats and dogs.

In each of the above, (a) is more similar to the original on a word basis, but (b) comes closer to conveying the impression given by the original because of the translator's identification and use of preexisting forms. As you can see, these "formal" demands are very strong and often take precedence over other considerations.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

An area of special concern to the English/Spanish translator is the question of regional differences in vocabulary. What shall be the translation of a simple word like "peas," for example, which is "guisantes" in Spain, "chícharos" in Mexico, "arvejas" in Argentina, "petits pois" in the Caribbean, etc.? Obviously, it may be of some help to think of the possible readers of the translation, but it is rare that a translation from English into Spanish, written in the U.S., will have readers of only one national group. A legal notice to the Hispanic community, an article for a Spanish-language newspaper, a form letter, etc., will be read by Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, Uruguayans and Chileans. Most regional differences, however, occur at the lexical rather than the morphological level; that is, they usually affect only the names of things, rather than the structure of the language. Moreover, *most speakers know the standard as well as the regional names of things*; i.e., Mexicans know that in most places *camión* means "truck," even if for them it means "bus," just as Americans know that "gas" is "petrol" in England. In general, unless a translation is exclusively for readers of one particular national group, *it is better to aim at a standard Spanish that is as free from regionalisms as possible.*

ANGLICISMS

Closely related to the problem of regional differences is the question of the use of anglicisms, words like "relevante" for "relevant" and "nursa" for "nurse." The Spanish spoken in the United States is constantly bombarded by the English language, and it is inevitable, probably even desirable, that certain words be officially adopted. But this is a long, slow process, and there is a long period during which the status of certain words is indefinite. In a given region where people may use words like "rufo" (roof) and "liqueando" (leaking) in conversation, there is a temptation to use them in writing also.

It is impossible to make a blanket statement that would cover all situations, but there are two things that should be kept in mind in deciding whether to use anglicisms or standard Spanish expressions. First, people of every culture make a distinction between spoken and written language; the written language is nearly always more conservative, slower to admit borderline forms and phrases. Anglicisms are more alarming in print than they are in everyday speech. Many people are offended by them because they feel that the Spanish language ought to be respected and that existing Spanish words ought not to be displaced by formations from English. The second point to consider, then, is that the translator who peppers his work with anglicisms may be sending several erroneous messages: that he thinks his readers are incapable of understanding standard Spanish; that the Spanish language is not worth preserving in its original form; that he, the translator, is incapable of making a proper distinction between spoken and written language.

Anglicisms are justified when they accurately identify an object or idea for which there exists no equivalent in the other language (such cases are extremely rare), and also when they are used with obvious stylistic intent — to express irony, outrage, frustration, to make a joke, etc.

In routine texts, however, the ends of communication are usually better served by accuracy and precision of expression, in standard Spanish, than by a folksy attempt to write "like people talk."

Note: when you are not certain whether a word is standard Spanish or an anglicism, consult a bilingual dictionary or the *Diccionario de dudas* (see Reference Tools, Appendix.)

STYLE AND TONE

The style and tone of a written text are an integral part of its meaning. Far more than a mere accessory veneer, they offer important clues as to the writer's seriousness, sincerity, mental state, ability to organize and express ideas, ability to deal with abstract concepts, and the like. The translator, then, in order to fully render the meaning of the original, must try to match its style and tone as closely as possible.

Is the translator ever justified in "improving" the style of a badly written original? If the original is incoherent, contains contradictions, grammatical errors, ambiguous references, etc., should it not be "corrected" by the translator? This is not a simple question to answer. In general, the translator's role is to facilitate communication; normally, communication is improved by judicious editing. However, great care must be exercised in making editorial changes in certain kinds of style-sensitive materials. When the style of a text relays insights of the type just mentioned, the translator should remember that these can be significant in a legal setting. Confusion and incoherence in the text of a deposition, for example, reflect to some extent the mental state of the deponent: a clear and coherent translation of such a text deprives the reader of certain of the essential features of the original.

How should the translator handle obscenities and abusive language? In an actual case, a woman giving a deposition in Spanish cited three or four obscene epithets her husband had hurled at her during an altercation. The translator, not wishing to offend anyone, substituted much milder words for these terms. Needless to say, the translator did the woman a great disservice in making such changes. Instead of improving communication between attorney and client, the translator effectively impeded it.

The texts you will be dealing with vary enormously as to their sensitivity in this respect. You will have to consider each example individually to determine the aspect of the message which is being conveyed by the style and tone of the passage. In all probability it will be helpful to keep the needs of the prime reader clearly in mind.

CULTURAL ADJUSTMENTS

Perhaps the trickiest fine-tuning of all is that which must be done because of cultural differences. Strange and erroneous impressions can be conveyed when the translator attends only to the words of the text and not to its cultural overtones. An English business letter may close with a simple "Very truly yours"; a conventional Spanish closing might be "Hago uso de esta oportunidad para saludar a Vd. muy atentamente y expresarle el testimonio de mi alta y distinguida consideración." The English writer expresses respect for the recipient of the letter by "not wasting the person's time" with "unnecessary" verbiage. The Hispanic writer, in contrast, may express deference for the person by spending additional time composing a suitably elaborate closing, making specific mention of the individual and of the writer's esteem.

Both closings are logical expressions of the cultures' unique ways of looking at personal relationships and of their attitudes towards time.

If the Spanish closing were to be rendered into English as "I take advantage of this opportunity to send you my most cordial greetings and to tell you of my high esteem for you," erroneous messages are conveyed — insincerity, servility, fuzzy-mindedness and inability to think are a few that come to mind. A translator must be sufficiently aware of the expectations and conventions of both cultures to be able to anticipate misunderstandings and to make necessary adjustments. In the example cited, the translator might match the formality of the conventional Spanish closing with the English equivalent: "Very truly yours." Though all the words are different, the feeling of respectful formality is the same.

CONCLUSION

We have touched very briefly on just a few of the many factors that influence what we have called the reader's impression. The process of translation can be seen to involve extremely difficult decisions based on linguistic, cultural, psychological and aesthetic judgments, requiring sensitivity on the part of the translator to the total number of ways in which the various aspects of the text may affect the reader. The subject is "difficult and ill-defined"; perhaps the age we live in, which has been called "the age of translation," will develop a scientific approach to translating that will be more reliable than the present seat-of-the-pants approach that relies so heavily on the intuition and life experience of the individual translator. Regarding the possible translation into English of Chinese philosophical concepts, I.A. Richards said, "We have here what may very well be the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos" (quoted by George Steiner in *After Babel*, p. 48).

We can take some comfort in Octavio Paz's observation that translation is after all possible, no matter how difficult it may be to do it well, because "en lenguas distintas los hombres dicen siempre las mismas cosas" (*Traducción: literatura y literalidad*, p. 7).

