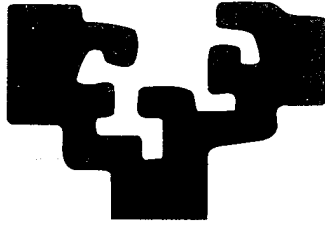


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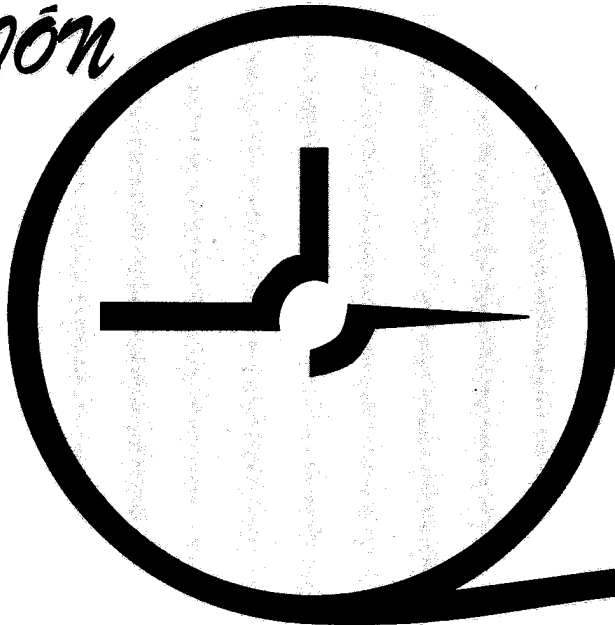
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TRANSLATION AND THE READER

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It can be considered as a truism to say that there are two activities involved in the process of translation: the reading and the re-writing of the text. The division between them may seem somewhat artificial, since both activities are inter-linked in the mind of the translator: s/he reads thinking of how s/he is going to write the text in the new language and s/he writes with the original in front as s/he cannot memorize the whole text. But we can, nevertheless, easily distinguish between a reading-centred stage and a writing-centred stage. Both when we are studying and when we are working, we focus on the problems of re-writing and not so much on the reading. In this paper, I will make a special point of the aspect of reading.

Very often, and due to time restrictions, we start to translate without having read the whole text. Usually this is not a problem. It may happen that we realize that a term that we translated in a certain way has a different meaning, according to the development of the text, but now, thanks to computers, it is easy to search the term and change it every time it appears. Nevertheless, when we deal with a literary work, the elements selected by the author to construct it and the literary devices that underpin it do all have a goal. Therefore, it is important to know that end so that we can fully appreciate and assess those elements that appear throughout the text.

Furthermore, I realized that the first time I read a text, I let myself be transported by the sentences in search of a *dénouement* as well as of a significance, as a "normal reader". In this position, one is too eager to find out what is going to happen next, which makes one skip many details that are thought irrelevant, uninteresting, unintelligible or which will just be blurred because of the reader's lack of attention. Many authors compare readers to a traveller in a stagecoach that makes a trip, usually difficult, through the novel, looking outside from an ever-changing viewpoint. Everything the readers see is combined with their memories and it depends on their own experiences that what they see moves them because it evokes some memory, or surprises them because they have never seen anything similar, etc. A reader will never have an objective vision, like a photographic camera. Furthermore, we can't always pay full attention to what we see: those memories or suggestions will keep our mind busy while we keep travelling or while our eyes keep reading. It is very common that our eyes keep moving through the lines while our mind is suspended at something that

impressed us and therefore we do not pay attention to the new developments. We can never have a complete vision of the trip. Nevertheless, that first reading is very important, since it allows us to appreciate characteristics such as the rhythm of the text, suspense, the ability to surprise and, in general, the different literary devices.

Later on, a second reading is necessary. Then, the translator is not a “pure reader” any longer, but a “reader/translator”. The translator doesn’t let her/himself be trapped by the fiction. Far from that, s/he will have to read very carefully and decipher the literal meaning of every word and sentence. To skip the details or to lose attention is not allowed to the “reader/translator”.

After those two readings, and still before starting the re-writing of the text, we have to take some decisions. Jirí-Levy, for instance, describes the art of translating as:

A DECISION PROCESS: a series of a certain number of consecutive situations -moves, as in a game- situations imposing on the translator the necessity of choosing a certain (and very often exactly definable) number of alternatives.¹

These decisions, for Jirí-Levy are, as in chess, based both on previous moves and on his future goals. But he has to wait to come across a word to make any decision. These would be “on the spot decisions”, but there might be others that I have called “previous general decisions” and that would affect the tone, the register, the degree of faithfulness, how close to the reader we want to bring the text, the kind of line or stanza we are going to use (in the case of poetry), etc. These decisions will allow the translator to avoid that feeling of groping her/his way in a state of confusion of mind that makes her/him feel hesitant and uneasy and will be determined by our goals. In chess we know exactly what we want, but what are the translator’s goals when s/he translates? As Hans J. Vermeer has stated:

A translation is directly dependent on its prescribed function, which must be made clear from the start.²

When translating legal texts, informative texts or advertising texts, we know very well which is their function, and we can decide, for instance, to be very literal in the translation of legal texts, in order to avoid possible wrong interpretations, or to take more liberty in the case of informative texts when our main goal is that the reader understands the texts, and even give complete freedom to our imagination or creativity in the case of advertising when the goal is to sell a product. But, if we acknowledge the importance of the function, the question is: what is the function of literature?

Out of the need to determine a function for literature, I took Wolfgang Iser’s approach, for whom the prime concern is no longer the *meaning* of the text but

its *effect*. The text is not a whole entity anymore, but an incomplete one that needs the active participation of the reader in order to achieve its fulfilment. The *meaning* of the text would lie then at the intersection between what is stated by the author and what is lurking in the reader's mind. The aim of the translation would be therefore not only to convey what is in the text but also to try to anticipate the effect on the source audience in order to be able to produce a similar effect on the target audience.

On a basic level, the first effect of reading is the ideation of that reality described in the text: "A reality that has no existence of its own can only come into being by way of ideation"³. The content of those mental images will be coloured according to the experience of the reader, that will act as a referential framework thanks to which the unknown can be conceived. The problem is that the translator's ideation, since s/he is not a native speaker, can diverge from that of the native speaker. Snell-Hornby and other authors point out that the translator must be bicultural or multicultural⁴. But this is not always the case. Even a translator who knows perfectly well the English and the Spanish reality, for instance, may be ignorant of the Australian and the Colombian realities. When this is the case, the translator can approach the native's ideation through photographs, books, conversations with native speakers and all kinds of documentation. In spite of the distance, this perspective can be interesting, since the translator should have this double approach: that of a foreign reader (which is the case of the audience s/he is writing for) and that of a "pseudo-native" (learning as much as possible about the culture where the text was produced).

To make the readers of the translation ideate the text in a way similar to that of the native speaker, the translator can explain to them those cultural references that appear *implicit* but not *explicit* in the text, and s/he can do so in many ways:

- by notes of the translator;
- by introductions;
- by explanations camouflaged within the text.

It is important to obtain a balance that makes the text understandable to the reader, but without boring him or her with excess information foreign to the development of the story narrated.

The reader's enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, i.e., when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play. There are, of course, limits to the reader's willingness to participate and these will be exceeded if the text makes things too clear or, on the other hand, too obscure: boredom and overstrain represent the two poles of tolerance, and in either case the reader is likely to opt out of the game.⁵

At this point, we may say that we know:

- the meaning of every word and sentence (included the meaning of those concepts which exist in the source language but not in the target language);
- those references implicit in the text;
- the stylistic devices that support the narration (tone, register, irony, puns, etc.)
- how we are going to deal with the translation.

That mental confusion that existed at the beginning will have vanished since we know:

- 1– What we want to say.
- 2– For whom we are going to translate.
- 3– What for.

The re-writing will become easier and, more or less, transparent.

I won't talk here about the aspect of re-writing the text. Instead, I will go on to talk about what happens when the translation is finished and it reaches the new readers. Will the effect on the target audience be similar to that produced on the source audience?

Going back to the notion of ideation it is easy to guess that, in spite of the translator's explanations, the reader of the translation is not likely to activate the same images. The non-native's ideation is less concrete since s/he is aware that the story is taking place in a foreign culture and therefore the images will be more blurred. Those images will be a mixture of the places the target audience knows and the empty space that they will fill little by little following the clues given by the author, or in this case, also by the translator. Furthermore, since the blurred area will be larger, the target audience will be able to accept more new images and therefore to increase its experience even in a broader way than the source audience. This is what makes translation so enriching. Using Bakhtin's notion:

The word is not a thing, but rather the eternally mobile, eternally changing medium of dialogical intercourse. It never coincides with a single consciousness or a single voice. The life of the word is in its transferral from one mouth to another, one context to another, one social collective to another, one generation to another. In the process the word does not forget where it has been and can never wholly free itself from the dominion of the contexts of which it has been a part.⁶

On a second level, we can deal with the understanding of the work and here we can take into consideration the notion of background/foreground. This relation is created by the selection made by the author. The chosen element would

be the foreground in the text, while its original context will be the background. This background is not usually formulated in the text itself but it depends on the competence of the readers. The background/ foreground link influences the understanding of the text. In Iser's words:

In the literary text, not only is the background unformulated and variable, but its significance will also change in accordance with the new perspectives brought about by the foregrounded elements; the familiar facilitates our comprehension of the unfamiliar, but the unfamiliar in turn restructures our comprehension of the familiar.⁷

Now, what happens in the translation is that this relation is somewhat changed. Concerning the background, there is always a distance between the author's background and the reader's background and between any two different readers, but the split is greater when the reader belongs to a different culture. While the author's background remains the same, the target reader's background is different from the source reader's. In the same way, we can say that the foregrounded elements won't affect the author's or the source reader's background (which was the one meant to be affected by the author) but the target reader's, since the latter will apply those elements to his/her own background, by means of analogy. We can say that when both the author and the reader belong to the same reality, the latter acts as a **participant**, whereas when they belong to different realities, the reader acts as an **observer**. This position, although more distant, may be as interesting, or even more, as that of the participant. There are authors that choose consciously to create that relation by writing historical or science fiction novels in which, through presenting the events in a reality foreign to that of the reader may manage to turn the reader more willing to accept his own system's flaws by comparison.

Finally, we can conclude that the aspiration of the translator would be that of creating an effect on the reader, although different, remaining at the same time as faithful as possible to the author. This way the translator will be able to offer to the target reader new viewpoints thus enlarging their knowledge of the world. Quoting Walter Benjamin, in translations "the life of the originals attain (...) its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering".⁸

NOTES

¹ Levy, Jirí (1989), "Translation as a decision process" in *Readings in Translation Theory*, Finland, Loimaan Kirjapaino, pp. 37-52 (p. 38).

² Snell-Hornby, Mary (1990), "Linguistic Transcoding or Cultural Transfer? A Critique of Translation Theory in Germany" in *Translation, History and Culture*, ed. by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, London and New York, Pinter Publishers, pp. 79-86 (p. 83).

³ Iser, Wolfgang (1978), *The Act of Reading, A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 38.

⁴ Bassnett, Susan and Lefevere, André, eds., *Translation, History and Culture*, London and New York, Pinter Publishers, p. 82.

⁵ Iser, Wolfgang, p. 108.

⁶ Díaz-Diocaretz, Myriam (1985), *Translating Poetic Discourse: Questions on Feminist Strategies in Adrienne Rich*, Amsterdam / Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, p. 25.

⁷ Iser, Wolfgang, p. 94.

⁸ Benjamin, Walter (1968), "The Task of the Translator", in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn, New York, Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, p. 69.

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