

**A WORD OR TWO
ON WORDS**

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If you will look on page 1283 of the *Dictionary of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language*, you will find that in its first sense the word *traducir*, to translate, means "to express in one language what is written or has been expressed previously in another." As the dictionary says, then, it is a matter of words. Besides, everyone knows that.

Nothing calls for more words, though, than words themselves. It seems that the way to clarify or sharpen our understanding of one word is with another: *traducir* is *expresar*, to express. And what is that? Turning to page 599, we learn that *expresar* is, again in the first sense, "to say, indicate with words, what one intends to convey." This is getting complicated. We have, in effect, found two sorts of "to express": that of the author, who "indicated with words what he intended to convey," and that of the translator, who indicated with words (in his own language) what he in turn intended to convey. According to this, "to translate" is to intend to convey in one language what someone else intended to convey in another. You may say it makes no difference, but the two "definitions" fit together, imperfectly. It is not a question of the translator *intending* to convey what the other person *intended*. Whether he wishes to or not, the translator, if he truly is a translator, *must* convey not what the author of the original *meant* to convey, but what he did in fact convey.

A number of years ago, Hans Kelsen visited Buenos Aires, and, at one of the lectures on his book, *Teoría pura del derecho*, Carlos Cossio--who then held the chair in Philosophy of Law at the University and was the author of *La teoría egológica del derecho*--was to set out what the two theories had in common and what the irreconcilable differences between them were. At one point, he had to read a paragraph from the *Teoría pura* and state what was said there. Kelsen reacted immediately and, almost angrily, exclaimed: "Professor, I never, at any time, intended anything of the kind." To this Cossio replied: "I beg your pardon, Dr. Kelsen, but when you intend to say something, say it. What it says here is what I have just indicated."

What the translator conveys--expresses--ought to be *what* the author of the original conveyed. Risky as it is, let us assume that we know precisely what "to convey" means--not because it is not a problem, but to avoid asking too much of words. Instead, let us consider what seems to be the crux of the problem: what is meant by *what* the author of the original conveyed. After all, that should be the *what* the translator conveys. For example --and let this serve as an indication of what the difficulties are to those who think that here is where the fewest problems lie-- take the well-known.

Verde que te quiero verde

which any moderately well-trained translator could render as

Green that I love you green,

which, as far as *what* the poet "conveyed" goes, leaves us as much in the dark in English as in Spanish. Of course, it is poetry. And everybody knows that poetry is untranslatable. Granted. It is so even when it is not a matter of violently subjective (lyric?) poetry such as Lorca's, but of descriptive poetry, which is much less precious. At verses 115 and 116 of Canto XXIII of the *Illiad*, what Homer conveys is that

*Much did they ascend and again descend and by turning
this way and that along narrow paths made they their way.*

The usual accentuation of verse 115 is as follows:

pollá d'ánanta kátanta párantá te dójmiá t'élthon

but the accents scan in the following way:

pólla d'anánta katánta paránta té dójmia t'élthon.

"Of course," you may say, "this is still poetry, and in any case one does not translate sounds as a function of metrics but words as a function of meaning." I grant that too, but it is worth pointing out that though *what* Homer conveys does not depend on onomatopoeia, it is strengthened and filled out by the assistance the latter gives the verse: we do not only *know* that the mules went up and down and turned again and again: we *hear* their hooves the whole way along the mountain track. But there is more, and it is that that progress, through its whole length described for us by Homer's onomatopoeia, ends abruptly, by contrast, at a point in time and action, when they reach the top. The aorist --*élthon*-- describes, does not just describe but *shows* the mules at the precise moment when, after their turning and turning again, their hooves strike the top of the hill. With this word, the verse ends. Our reading of the line conveys to us that the arrival of the mules at the top is the natural and final consequence of the progress drawn out to that moment: the Greek reading conveys, to the contrary, that enduring action is resolved, by contrast, in the arrival, a conclusion that stands out against all that has gone before yet in which all culminates. The onomatopoeia virtually draws the words swiftly through the verse in an uninterrupted flow which corresponds to the long --and difficult-- effort; in contrast, the last word freezes the action precisely at the point where it ends. Even the final effort of the mules before reaching the top is caught in a way that affects not the understanding or the mind of the reader or singer declaiming the verse, but his diaphragm: the play of breath, the vowels and the muscular contraction (*dójmia, t'é, th*), requires one to slow the pace of one's breathing more and more, immediately after the onomatopoeia and before the final rest on the word *elthon*: they have arrived.

If this is *what* Homer conveyed, you can see how little of it can be caught in Spanish with its comparatively poor expressive resources.

"Fine," you'll say, "but that's not the problem. Everyone knows that you don't translate words or sound but ideas." For the third time, granted, though it may well be too much of a concession. Ever since Plato gave it a special meaning, this had been one of the words with greatest range of meanings in the language. *Idea* means so many different things at the same time that it is necessary to say what one means each time it is used. And what is more, it seems that all of these uses require that it be understood as a kind of product to the mind, and so as something that is in some particular person's thoughts. In any case, as has been suggested, what is to be translated is the expression of ideas, not the ideas as such. It must be said that it is not the objective situation to which the idea refers that is

translated --nor is the idea, but the reference of the idea, when expressed, to the situation-- in sum, what the expression signifies. This, too, is common knowledge. But without having to go into the deeps of Hegel's *Logic*, or into the abyss of Husserl's theory of judgement, or into Wonderland with Alice to clarify what it means to mean, a few points can be made here.

If *what* Homer had in mind as an idea was "the mules finally climbed the mountain," then it was certainly not what he said; what he said considerably exceeds what, strictly speaking, one could call "the thing signified." In other cases, the author does not even come close to it: remember Lorca. In such cases, perhaps one must translate words. And in some other cases, sounds: certain poems by Alexandre, or, leaving poetry aside, parts of Beckett or Joyce may serve as good examples. However that may be, sounds also have their rules within a language, and if the effect to which they are directed cannot be called meaning, there is no doubt that they are intended for an effect that, to the degree possible, one must preserve.

It is simply not possible to systematize in anything like exhaustive fashion the factors that work against not just quality in translation, but translation itself--or for that matter the factors that can work in its favor. But it seems clear that there are such factors, and these are more important than mere equivalence: equivalence depends on these in degrees which range from nuancing to substitution.

A complementary phrase does not *mean* the same thing in a laudatory as in an ironical text. So there is a factor that we can call context, in its first sense. But in its second, more general, sense, context means the universe of language in which each and every one of the words and each and every one of the relationships in which they may possibly be found are governed by internal rules as to their constitution and use. *Alguna cosa* is not the same thing in Spanish as *cosa alguna*: the first is something, the second "nothing at all"; here a simple inversion of the *order* in which the terms appear is sufficient to give the phrase even its opposite meaning. It is not difficult to imagine that this kind of thing occurs with more complex connectives. It may well happen that if the same words (those originally equivalent in the translation) mean something different than do the original words, one may have to change the words so that they will say the same thing. The context is the limiting factor in deciding which words to use--these instead of those, or this sense instead of the other.

Besides, style counts--as a limitation on the possible variations of semantic and syntactic form within the two concepts of context. Joyce is not Faulkner nor is Quevedo Cortázar. And none of these is,

of course, the translator. That is why it is often necessary to struggle with two problems: one is to recognize and capture the style of the author, and the other is not to substitute one's own for it. We all tend to say things the way we would say them, instead of saying them as the one who said them did.

Context and style are the limits, one objective and the other subjective, of this field in which different levels of expressive resources are given form: from the prosaic, direct and purely informative language of a technical pamphlet to the subtleties of a polished and highly adorned literary description or an epistle from Paul. In each and every case, the translator is confronted with a text and not an author; what he has before him is a universe with its own laws, which generally do not coincide with those of his universe, from which he cannot escape and to which, besides, he must bring what is in--or can be extracted from--the other, this without losing sight of the fact that he must extract it just as it is while transforming it into something entirely different. A simple matter, really.

In all these and many other senses, translation is itself a limit. Perhaps it is what Juan Manuel, in the Preface to *El conde Lucanor*, "meant" six centuries ago:

And because *don* Juan saw and understood that in books many errors are made, because the letters resemble one another, mistaking one for another in writing them down, and the sense is altered and by change confused, and those who later fault the writing blame the author of the book.