

INTUITION AND TRANSLATION

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We often have strong intuitive responses to experience which we do not quite manage to express in words: I mean that puzzling sense that something is right or wrong, and of what goes with what. These come to us very quickly, before we have taken thought, and are just as quickly expressed. These imperfectly captured intuitions, if thought through, can provide us with real insights into experience--including some first-hand knowledge of how misleading our early attempts at expressing them may be!

It would be well to keep in mind that we do not always say what we think or feel, and so our capacity to express ourselves precisely may not, in many private and intimate matters, have been exercised. Saying well what we ourselves only partly understand--as is the case with our intuitions about language--is a discipline rather than a game, and it has its rewards. It is, in any case, important for the translator to discover and express his intuitions about language: without these first, rough drafts of our intuitions we would have nothing to refine into our later, more polished and serviceable insights.

A student of mine recently voiced an intuition of the kind that I am speaking of, and all the rest of the members of the seminar concurred in her expression. They did so, I think, because they had each had the intuition, it was fresh on their minds, and they all lacked an expression for it. From around the table came the response: Yes!

It is important that it was general and whole-hearted, a kind of recognition that there was *something* there requiring expression, or that the particular expression was apt or gave better control over experience or advanced their understanding in some way. Such general affirmations are not, in any simple way, what we often take them to be: an agreement that the expression is altogether and finally appropriate. At best they give us something to go on.

In a seminar in which a particularly difficult description of character was treated, each student read out his translation and one remarked that it seemed to her that there were *more possible solutions when translating into English than when translating into Spanish*. A native speaker of Spanish, she surprised me by her remark. How could it appear to her that in translating into her second language there were more possibilities than in translating into her first?

I had had a similar experience, but the other way around, when I began to study Spanish, and remembered well enough Randolph Haynes' point that in Spanish there was a greater freedom of syntactical organization than in English, a product of its verbs bearing the marks of their conjugation and its nouns and adjectives those of gender. In English, one is more often faced with the dilemma pointed up in Leo Rosten's play on words: It is not the same to get a pregnant elephant in a Volkswagen as to get an elephant pregnant in a Volkswagen. While in Spanish sequence may be largely a matter of style, in English it may make the sense or fail to.

The bases of the two understandings differed: mine was a matter of formal resources taught to me by a specialist; hers was a more personal matter, a given experience of language such as any one of us might have: confronted by the large range of possibilities, she suddenly felt that *anything* was possible, and so suspended her normal judgement. I think that we must try to see how such a thing can come about, for, after all, it must be virtually an article of faith for the translator that there are "core" meanings. If not, what is it that translators are about?

First: In our own language, we ordinarily have all that is necessary to make the finest discriminations experience should require of us--certainly that our individual experience has required. This is true not only of language but also of our experience of society. We do not, of course, always *make* the finest discriminations of which we are capable: in much of our use of language it is not necessary to do so and may even work against intelligibility. Besides, there are good social reasons for not telling all, and we have learned from childhood to whom and how to talk about what.

Second: We generally lack this full range of experience in the second language. It is quite an extraordinary thing when we do have it. Instead, we have a more or less well-developed set of equivalences for that part of experience which the two languages share, or have been made to share by our own, perhaps merely individual experience. Our power of expression in the second language is rarely subtle, yet we do have what it takes *to come to understand* subtleties in the second language. This is true, too, of what we do not know in our own language and society--but the fact is largely obscured by our focus on *what* we know or *want* to know. Let us say, then, that in our native language we are capable of making the connections, and in the second of learning what connections are made.

Let me try to sharpen the distinction.

The process must surely be the same in whatever language, and in all language. We virtually all come into the world equipped to make the connections. Much experience common to those who live within a particular language is not verbalized, needs no expression. Sometimes this is true for social, sometimes for individual reasons. Our experience is there, however, whether we express it or not, a resource shared by others, needing no explanation when we allude to it or invoke it. Now it is not necessarily easy to give expression to everyday experience but when we wish to talk about a part of such experience for which we lack a special idiom, we can draw on more familiar and more routinely verbalized aspects of life to do so. The reason for this is that within a society or language certain consistent relations may be seen to hold, relations such as are to be found in the "social structure" and in the (to us "natural") connections made in associating ideas or words or modes of expression. There are even consistent if not necessary relations between the worldview and the particular forms of material culture. It is the consistency and dependability of these relations that makes it possible for one to know when something is right or wrong, and what goes with what; even when the experience is new, it is possible to recognize the authentic and distinguish the clever fake.

In the second language, we rarely are sufficiently experienced to make the subtler discriminations, and so to know intuitively what is right. We are obliged to make many leaps in the dark, and for this we depend overwhelmingly on the connections that we have built up in our first language over the whole of our lifetimes, which is the training of the intuition in making sense. Whether we are aware of its as such or not, the learning of another language is not only a matter of acquiring its its vocabulary, syntax and rhetoric, nor is it a matter of simply learning to make the connections. One's intuition

has been more or less finely tuned for the one world and is sure to be ill-adapted to the work of making connections in the second. It is instead a matter of *re-training* the intuition for coping with the other experience.

In these circumstances, in which not only the language but the experience is lacking, there is a remarkable *flatness*, if you will, to our vision of that other experience. Or, if not to the vision, then to the expression we can give it. And here we are often taken in. Play with language being basic to the human experience, we even try to play with the new language--new, that is, to us. We cannot bear its flatness. Language forms--words, phrases, idioms--come to be loaded with meanings they are not necessary or at all obvious from the form itself. These are matters of usage, and regardless of the principles by which such things occur, they simply have come to mean particular things that are "invisible" to the logical eye of the alien to that world. We all know this to be true, and we are untiring in pointing it out, to others yet when we use that second language we may imagine or assume that we have divined its invisible load of meanings, and that we, too, can play with the language or even enrich it! This is a trap: for that load of particular meanings is there despite its being invisible to us, and the fact that the load is there is itself meaningful: the one because the meanings there already make a particular kind of sense, the other because mankind is passionate about making distinctions and assigning meanings. The forms are not there for no reason at all.

No addition to another language is simple. You may find yourself punning in a foreign language--cleverly, it seems to you!--only to find that to the native speaker the key words are not contrasted in sound and meaning, or that punning is not one of the language games played. To *play* you must have mastered the resources and the *possible* connections, for only these can be made. In this kind of knowledge there is relief to our flat understanding of the other language.

To generalize the student's point, let us say that she felt there were *more possible right answers in the second language than in the first*. If we are on the right track, it will now make sense to say that the reason for the relative freedom she felt is to be found in her quite full acquaintance with her own language: *she knows what goes with what there*, and senses when an error has been made and when some expression does not fit or does not quite set the right tone. It is this experience of language which the student lacks--and misses--in the second language.

We are, of course, not concerned in a strict numerical sense with "more." We are interested instead in the impression which would lead her to express herself as she has. What she really means is this: *I cannot now sift through, distinguish the various forms. They all seem, somehow, about the same. I can in Spanish, so I have the impression that there are more subtleties and discriminations in Spanish and fewer constraints in English.* But that is not what she said.

She does not distinguish between *data that she does not have* and *data that does not exist*. This most human of flaws is treacherous for the translator, but it can be compensated for, in part, by remembering that one's own language has its rules, and that one's *experience* of its use will lead one aright even where one does not know how to state the rules. The right reaction is that the other language must be the same *in this sense*. The wrong reaction is that the other language is without rules and guidelines to appropriateness, that is, other than one knows Language in general to be in this fundamental way.

How does the error come to be made? And how, then, can one avoid it?

First, by the fact that one knows what the resources of one's own language are and expects to find them in the other. That is, one expects the *particular* resources, not the same *kinds* of resources or the same basic relationships. The particulars are lacking. Second, by a lack in us as individuals, as when we are ignorant of something. How do we know that we do not know? In the absence of experience, we are humanly at a loss to know these particular things but *we can arm ourselves with a systematic doubt about the completeness of our knowledge*, and so anticipate or ameliorate the fact of not knowing. (Please note that I am specifically *not* encouraging a loss of confidence in oneself but am rather directing attention to objective and testable matter --what we know-- whose flaws can be corrected by learning.) The student's observation has now come to mean this: *I do not have grounds to judge the appropriateness of what seem to me to be the possible forms.* This, clearly, is the critical point, the very basis for coming to a judgement.

How different is this formulation from the student's first attempt! Before, there was a quite mysterious comparison between languages, superficially objective but providing us with no way to go forward with what we are doing: a translation. What grounds might there be for preferring *one* of the alternatives offered in the seminar

over the others? One solution, for a translation differs from an analysis in, at least, this fundamental way: it must be an *equivalent form*, a single form that solves the puzzle posed by the original.

There is no wholly adequate expression for experience. We are always faced with the problem of adapting ready-made expressions, the available social and linguistic expressions, to our experience. Not at all unlike poets, we are obliged to master this public language and use it for our own ends--that is, wherever it suits our purpose to express our experience. We must make this public stuff of language do for us what we need it to do; that is what is meant by *mastering* a language, even our own.

The initial response to the experience of translation will have seemed to some to have been altogether too "simple" and the discussion I have given it too obvious by far. The student's statement, though, was not foolish, only unfinished, unconsidered. Many of our responses to experience are "simple" in this way: they come unconsidered into our minds--and often out of our mouths at exactly the wrong moment. They do not do so for no reason at all.

What is the value of explicating a "simple" problem of this complexity?

First, to show that it is not simple, even though it may be in some sense elementary. Behind the error implicit in the expression is a powerful intuition that may affect the whole enterprise of translation: a rule-less second language is a fiction, and in translation, where precision is of the essence, to imagine that one has a free hand is to court disaster. Why, then, would one bother to be precise? To imagine that one's own language is so superior to the other in its capacity for fine and meaningful distinctions is to assume, at once, the inferiority of the other. In both attitudes there is a mystery: Why bother to translate at all? One has come to a final conclusion without beginning. Such attitudes, based on the faulty expression of a useful insight, cannot but distort understanding and predispose the translator against the texts that come before him.

It is not the intuition but the *expression* that prejudices. One's intuitions come from unconscious levels within, are largely untouched by mind. Expression, though it taps these sources, is susceptible to our manipulation. There are things that we would not, dare not, say or even think, things that the society in which we live sanctions, or that we, in the particularity of our lives, cannot abide. When the expression is before us--written down, spoken out, made public--we can examine these for the truths that lie within them and can discard such distortions as we find.

This is, then, not at all a trivial problem, but a very deep one in the guise of mere spontaneous talk. It is true, as Rodney Needham says, that "the essential is all around us."

Second, to show that such things can be investigated profitably, and so to work, to the degree that one can, against confusions and fears that are not necessary, to dispell the mysteries that can be dispelled. W.W. Sawyer, writing about the strategy and tactics of study, says that

People often go about with a fog of small difficulties in their heads: they are not quite sure of what the words mean, they are not quite sure what has gone before, they are not quite sure what is the object of the work. All these difficulties can be dealt with easily, if they are taken one at a time.¹

I am very much in sympathy with this attitude, which comes from a mathematician who is also a teacher. This, then, is a moral point:

...it is extremely bad for human beings to acquire the habit of cowardice in any field. The ideal of mental health is to be ready to face any problem which life may bring--not to rush hastily, with averted eyes, past places where difficulties are to be found.²

I think that the application to the problem of the translator is clear. And if language is more complex than mathematics--for the fact that there are so many levels of meaning possible and so many formal systems and conventions of usage at work with which the translator must cope at the same time--it is also true that texts, like mathematics, will hold still for analysis and so are more like that cool discipline than they are like the briefest conversation with a friend or a lover, where cowardice and clarity of mind are always at stake. It is relatively easy to be cool about texts and translation.

And third, I wanted to make the point that our intuitions are *not* the same as our expressions, a point by now drummed in perhaps all too thoroughly. It is possible to stand back from even so complex a

¹ W.W. Sawyer, *Mathematician's Delight* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1943), p. 45.

² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

thing as our own feelings and reflect on them. Here, of course, I am making a point which is both moral and pragmatic. If a translator believes that his intuitions and their expression are one, then he will miss a rich source of insightful solutions: himself. He will fail to develop a keen and sympathetic ear for his own understandings and the experience of his life in its particulars, and so he will be unable to tap these for his professional use. The discrimination between the intuition, which is rarely wrong, and the expression thereof, which often is quite mistaken, permits the translator to assume a right relation to the texts that come before him. What might such a right relation be? The goal, it seems to me, is to be worthy of Robert C. "Sing" Stephenson's appraisal of Keith Botsford as translator: that he is *intellectually humble before the text*.

So, the argument is this: When a thing is given form, it can be examined. You can see where it fits, and where it does not, with your experience and understanding. You can see where language has run away with you, and hear the false notes. It is no good saying: I'll say nothing until I know I've got it right. Getting it right depends absolutely on testing. Everytime something has been gotten right, it is because there were drafts, of a kind, before it, and none of these were quite right.

Intuition, with logic, is the great resource of the translator, better than dictionaries, the thesaurus and the local expert rolled into one. The intuition is what the translator must learn to tap in a disciplined and respectful way for the subtleties of language and social experience. When he can do so, he is well beyond the mere mechanical creature that many hold translators to be, and he will have before him the possibility of quality, richness and even creativity in the task by which he earns his daily bread.