Itineraries in Translation History / Itinéraires en histoire de la traduction

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ISBN 978 3 631 61744 1
Format (B x L): 14 x 21 cm
Gewicht: 530 g
Introduction. How is Translation Possible?

Is translation possible? Now here’s a thoroughly dull question. Of course translation is possible. We know this because we can see it happening all around us all the time, in one form or another. Nor is translation new. We can trace it back several thousand years, in different locations across the globe.

But the fact that translation exists and is therefore self-evidently possible should not blunt the force of this other question: how is translation possible?

With a bit of goodwill, the question could be taken in a double sense. It may be read as an expression of wonder, an exclamation rather than a real question. How on earth is translation possible? It is also a genuine question. What is it that renders translation possible? What are the conditions that enable and sustain translation as a social institution, a conceptual category, a historical phenomenon?

Let’s make wonder our starting point. It is worth marvelling at the sheer improbability of translation and the diversity of its manifestations. In fact, language itself is a highly improbable occurrence. To appreciate this, we should do as geologists and palaeontologists do and adopt the perspective of deep history, the kind of history that looks back not hundreds or thousands but millions of years. In evolutionary terms, language is a highly improbable outcome. We know that life on earth was largely wiped out on several occasions in the distant past. None of those earlier life forms developed language. The dinosaurs were around and evolved for over 160 million years; they may have emitted sounds but they did not talk. Even among present-day fauna humans are exceptional. Chimpanzees do not talk, although their genetic code is virtually identical to ours.

We humans do have language, a remarkable evolutionary achievement. We do not just have language, we have languages, plenty of them, and all different. They are so different in design and structure that communication from one language to another cannot be taken for granted. Even among speakers of one and the same language successful communication is not guaranteed. The sentences you are reading may or may not mirror what went on in my head as I typed them, and I can only guess at the inferences you draw as you read them. We might try to confirm our respective understandings but in doing so we would only produce additional sentences and thus compound the problem.

If language and languages are unlikely evolutionary outcomes, translation, too, must be improbable. Its occurrence on a more than incidental basis is equally surprising. We may gain a better understanding of the emergence of translation as
socially constituted activity if we see it not as a natural given at all but as something manufactured, a cultural product achieved laboriously and against odds.

Just how heavily the odds are stacked against it becomes clearer if we reflect on the emergence of translation in situations of radical difference, settings of “unresolved heterogeneity” as the South African translator Leon de Kock called them (2009: 22), in which even partial comprehension requires real effort. In situations like these there is no question of matchings or equivalences, only of exacting and initially uncodified approximation. Here are three brief examples.

In the 1950s the Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner (1905–1981), who did most of his fieldwork in the Australian outback in the 1930s, observed about the so-called ‘dreamtime’ of the Australian aborigines that its central meaning “is that of a sacred, heroic time long ago when man and nature came to be as they are; but neither ‘time’ nor ‘history’ as we understand them is involved in this meaning” (2009: 57). Having worked hard to grasp and then to articulate, in English, his understanding of a concept utterly alien to Western thought, he added: “Why the blackfellow thinks of ‘dreaming’ as the nearest equivalent in English is a puzzle” (2009: 58). In a now celebrated essay of 1953, ‘The Dreaming’, Stanner coined a new word to voice The Dreaming’s peculiar sense of then and now and always: *everywhen*. The word is evidently not a translation. It is evidence of the absence of translingual correspondence in a context of unresolved heterogeneity. If a term like ‘dreamtime’ ends up being accepted as the translation of an alien concept, it is not for reasons of correspondence or equivalence but as a result of habituation.

In his book *Nuer Religion* of 1956, a study of the beliefs and rituals of the Nuer in southern Sudan, the Oxford ethnographer Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973) recognised that Nuer practices, concepts and words had developed independently of Western influence and were incommensurable with Western and Christian terms. The effort first to comprehend what the Nuer meant when they talked about their beliefs and then to write up his findings threw the ethnographer back on his own English vocabulary and its particular history. Throughout his book Evans-Pritchard highlighted the sheer difficulty of understanding, and then translating, something which is radically different and can be approached only through the painstaking labour of what he called “contextual interpretation”. Today we might, with a nod to Anthony Kwame Appiah, speak of “thick translation”, the heavily footnoted explicatory kind of translation that seeks to document, even as it offers a rendering of sorts, the difficult process of fabricating a more or less suitable match in another tongue. But thick translation can only be the beginning of an answer, not the answer itself. Jacques Derrida sensed exactly what thick translation means. As he grappled with a migratory, half-English and half-French term like ‘relevant’ in his 1999 essay ‘What Is a “Relevant” Translation?’, he observed that everything is translatable provided we have an infinity
of time and a limitless supply of words; and even then our words will be tainted by histories and values alien to those in the foreign text.

Translation does not log existing correspondences between languages and cultures. It creates them, and they may then subsequently be catalogued and stored in bilingual dictionaries. We can see the process in action historically when two utterly different cultures first encounter each other and begin to sort out similarities and differences. In an insightful essay Lydia Fossa (2005) has traced the way in which the sixteenth-century Spanish translator Juan de Betanzos, who ended up working in Peru, struggled to make Spanish match the local Quechua words and concepts he was learning. He proceeded by fixing passing, provisional intersections in meaning between the two languages into glossaries and colloquies. The various texts he produced show the sheer labour of translating in their jumble of glosses, explications, paraphrases and untranslated Quechua words. The forcible matchings Betanzos and others eventually, tentatively, brought about were later streamlined into phrase books and dictionaries whose neat columnar layout suggests timeless and transparent correspondence. But that neatness obscures the discrepancies and asymmetries, the over- and undertranslations, the ideological filters and willed alignments that enabled the correspondence to become established in the first place.

The examples suggest that translation is brought into being through hesitant, repeated practice. First come gropings and glosses and provisional mappings, which are then codified within institutional settings. Gradually, as the rough beginnings stabilise through repetition and rehearsal, a social practice develops, becomes institutionalised and builds a sense of seamless continuity, until we think we can translate. Translation as a cultural practice is rendered possible by the growth and consolidation of a translation tradition.

If it is useful, at the start of a volume detailing a range of translation traditions, to try and imagine the uncertain beginnings of translation as such, it may be equally useful to speculate on the ways in which histories of translation could be written.

Here we are confronted with a paradox. While there are numerous studies dealing with all manner of aspects of the history of translation in various parts of the globe, including some large-scale national histories, there has been relatively little reflection on translation historiography as such. In English we have just one book-length discussion of methodology, Anthony Pym’s *Method in Translation History* of 1998. Entries on translation history and historiography in encyclopedias and handbooks confine themselves to the inventory of material data – the ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘how’ and ‘for whom’ of translations – and have nothing to say about how to make sense of the data.

Clearly, the writing of history means the telling of a tale. Historiography cannot help being narrative. The mass of actors and events is sorted by devising a plot structure that permits sifting and foregrounding, sequencing and connecting,