

Found in Translation: A Phenomenology of Translation

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Effective philosophical discussion requires an awareness of the nuances of language and the process of translating between different modes of communication. In this increasingly globalized academic forum, many feel that today's linguistic challenges are more extreme than those of the past. Yet translation has been a necessary part of the work of philosophy for centuries, whether translating from Greek to Latin or German to Spanish. Because of this, I would like to explore the relationship between translation and philosophy by undertaking a phenomenology of translation. By investigating the way in which translation affects the growth of philosophers, we may be able to come to some understanding of how translation informs philosophy as a field and find out what qualities make a translation good.

The Reader

When a person first begins to be interested in a text written in a foreign language, he or she has usually been told about it by someone else – a professor, a friend, perhaps even the author of another book. Some sort of summary is given, and the person finds the subject matter intriguing enough to pursue. This first stage is dependent on chance in many ways, and the expressed content of the book can often be quite different from what it actually contains. Each person will have their own feelings and impressions about the text, as well as different levels of study - a professor may highly recommend *Faust* when a student might deem it unintelligible and boring. But, assuming our protagonist's interest is piqued, he or she will have to approach the book for the first time in translation.

Choosing the best translation is a daunting task for someone who does not know what the book is supposed to sound like or contain. As Meno says, “how are you going to search for this...when you don't know at all what it is?”¹. If there are a few translations to choose from, which may not be the case in some libraries and bookstores, the person may end up making his or her decision based on the first sentence, reviews on the back, price, or even the cover. Reading the first sentence is the strategy most likely to leave one with a book that would be pleasant to read, but does not guarantee fidelity to the original.

¹ Plato: Meno. Trans. R.W. Sharples. Chicago, IL: Warminster, Wiltshire: Bolchazy-Carducci Aris & Phillips, 1991, 61.

Our reader will find that approaching a philosophical text in translation is a quite a different experience from reading one in his first language. In many instances, each sentence will have several footnotes giving historical and linguistic context. These are included to help the reader, but have the unfortunate side effect of fragmenting the reading experience and interrupting the author's original train of thought. Unfortunately, the footnotes that are most helpful for scholars can often lead lay readers into confusion – these usually connect a particular phrase or thought to secondary literature or give tangentially related historical and biographical facts. On the other hand, the books containing the type of footnotes that are usually most helpful to a layperson can end up also giving information that was easily gleaned from context or falls in the realm of common sense. A translation without footnotes may leave readers extremely confused about what is happening in a book, especially in the case of puns that don't translate easily, references to authors whose works have been lost, or political commentary from several thousand years ago. Occasionally, when endnotes are used instead of footnotes, the reader has the option of simply pretending that there is no commentary being made and checking them when a concept is legitimately confusing or a phrase unclear. This method gives the reader control over the experience, which can make it more enjoyable, but does not allow the translator to ensure that the reader will grasp difficult concepts by wrenching him or her down to the bottom of the page.

This is not to say that footnotes are bad as a rule, but rather to point out the problems with them as used by a translator. Many authors choose to use footnotes, but the reader knows that the footnotes provided by the author are probably germane to the discussion of the book and necessary to read – confidence that is often not placed in the translator's views. The most striking example of this is in a book that contains footnotes by both the author and translator. Often the translator will come up with an elaborate system to keep the footnotes separate - using numbers and symbols, different fonts, etc. – resulting in a cluttered page and a confused reader.

Another difficulty that comes from reading a work in translation is the way in which words take on or leave behind different shades of meaning. As a reader, one cannot be expected to know the full implications of a particular word in another language, but neither can the translator be expected to express the full meaning of a word that has no direct correlate. Depending on how the work has been translated, the reader will interact with a word differently. Sometimes, a word will be translated in the same way consistently

throughout the book, say ‘virtue’ or ‘excellence’ for ‘arête’. The reader will be able to identify when the author is talking about a particular concept connected to that word, but may not grasp the nuances of the original idea. There is also the possibility of misinterpretation based on the chosen translated word – perhaps one might think that Socrates and Meno are discussing chastity when they are talking about manly excellence.

After this first foray into a text, if the reader has remained interested and gotten something out of the book, he or she may decide to attempt a translation. Often readers feel that they have the gist of the book, and that doing a translation would help fill in a few gaps. Dictionary in hand, our reader begins to explore the original.

The Scholar

Before the scholar has a complete grasp of the new language, he or she lugs around a few different books, usually the text in the original language, a few translations, a reputable dictionary, and perhaps a book explaining trickier grammatical constructions. A reliance on secondary information is characteristic of this period in a philosopher’s growth – knowing very little personally, beginning scholars have a tendency to consume information about a text with very little discrimination. After experiencing the difficulty of engaging with a text firsthand, the scholar lacks confidence in his or her own opinions, and attempts to gain some by reading works that have a certain legitimacy in the community. This strategy is a good one, but cannot be followed indefinitely.

First attempts at translations often have characteristics of the original language and that into which they are being translated, but are not fully intelligible in either. The word order may be a little strange, and the word choices may not be commonly used. This muddling of languages affects the scholar as well as the translation. Often, young Platonists will find the ‘μεν...δε’ construction, meaning something like ‘on the one hand...on the other’ becoming a part of their everyday speech. Similarly, those difficult to translate words and concepts that we discussed in the previous section reveal their complexity to the scholar in a way that may fundamentally change his or her thinking. As Schopenhauer notes:

when we learn a language, our main problem lies in understanding every concept for which the foreign language has a word but for which our own language lacks an

exact equivalent...in learning foreign languages one must map out several new spheres of concepts in one's own mind that did not exist before.²

This new understanding leaves the scholar feeling victorious and informed, each painstaking revelation leading closer to a more real knowledge of the whole. A word like 'arête' no longer simply means 'excellence', as it did when the reader experienced the text in translation, but takes on the other qualities contained within it. Now the scholar can compare different terms that may have been translated similarly, say 'arête' and 'kala', which can both be translated as 'good', but have other meanings that add nuance – giving him or her a sense of how Greek approaches a broad concept like goodness and allowing conceptual comparisons to other languages.

The area of understanding that improves most noticeably is the way in which style affects the text. Although style's impact is most conspicuous in works of literature, it is by no means absent from philosophy. Metaphor and word play are consistently present in Socratic dialogues, which themselves are presented almost as plays. One clear case of the impact style has on a text occurs in metered works, as very few translations are able to preserve the rhythms of the original without huge sacrifices. For example, when reading *Oedipus Tyrannus* in Greek, one can see how Sophocles plays with his method of presentation. At one point during the play, he seems to deliberately break the complicated meter of the antistrophe, when the dancers would usually repeat the same steps as the strophe in reverse. This takes on a special significance when considered with the lines that accompany this portion of the dance, "Insolence...mounts to the topmost cornice and rushes to the edge of an abyss where its feet can do it no service"³ (874-879 Jebb). Sophocles physically illustrates his metaphor by disrupting the usually composed chorus, causing it to trip for several steps. It would be extremely difficult for something like this to be communicated in a translation, but slowly and carefully translating a text can provide the scholar with this otherwise inaccessible experience.

In the act of translating, the scholar necessarily learns how to read closely. This sort of study requires a rejection of preconceived notions about the work and nurtures a willingness to see what the author intended to say. Those small revelations that come from the practice of translation give the scholar new insights into the text. The complexity they

² Schopenhauer, A. "On Language and Words" Trans. Peter Mollenhauer. In Schulte and Biguenet's *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Chicago, IL, The University of Chicago Press, 1992, 33.

³ Sophocles: *Ajax, Electra, Oedipus Tyrannus*. Trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2001, 413.

uncover is daunting, and the scholar feels that, as Socrates says of the slave boy, “just as he doesn’t in fact know, so also he doesn’t even *think* he knows”⁴. The scholar becomes used to making translation mistakes, but, unlike the slave boy, he or she often does not have someone like Socrates to point the way. An ability to critique oneself and correct one’s own errors must be developed by going through a text slowly, rereading, and admitting to mistakes. This respect for the author, humility, and cultivation of independent skills allows the real work of translation to begin. Questions of how to translate emerge, and the work of translation becomes an exercise in understanding a complex thinker.

The Translator

After spending several years studying the language and the works of a particular author, one may be able to complete a translation that reflects the work in a nuanced and coherent manner. The translator has a sense of the original that includes subtleties that may have been missed by even native speakers of the language. This sort of global understanding is difficult to communicate through a translation. One can write a work of secondary literature explaining these thoughts, but this would still require a new translation, as many of the ideas emerge from word choices or concepts that may be obscured in other translations. Because of this, a translation is a much more effective and efficient way of expressing the thoughts of the author in the way that the translator feels is best, despite the many difficulties.

We have already discussed a number of perils that the translator must navigate, and some of the tool he or she has gained during the translation process. Now that the translator has spent so much time with the text, he or she is able to decisively say what the author means with a word – meanings which are often quite different from their common usage, as we see with Aristotle’s ‘*energeia*’. One final challenge remains - the audience. Interestingly, this duty to the audience is what makes previously good translations become bad ones. Over time, the language of a translation becomes more dated causing the word choices and explanations change in clarity and relevance. For a translation to be truly good, it must take into account both the reader and the author, with the translator acting as a sort of guide between the two. A good translator will help the reader toward the author’s thoughts, much in the way that Socrates brings Meno towards a discussion of virtue. Like Meno, much of that conversation may be lost on the reader, but participating in it will have

⁴ Plato: Meno, 75.

forced the reader, at least for a little bit, to engage thoughts that are largely foreign to him or her. It is not a fault for a translator to make the book more accessible to the reader – just as Socrates lets Meno steer the conversation, the translator may find that the reader’s attention is better kept if he or she enjoys the experience. The translator’s task is to unite the sense and meaning of a work in an intelligible and pleasant book, and it is not an easy one.

The Philosopher

After completing a translation, the philosopher not only has a clear understanding of what the book was about on multiple levels, but also a certain amount of distance from it. This space comes from having to critically examine the text to find places where the arguments and opinions are not particularly clear. Examining these ideas can lead to a more solid understanding of a book, but it can also unveil inconsistencies or logical errors. When the translator begins to disagree with the author from a place of understanding, he or she is properly participating in a philosophical discussion.

The reader that we began with often attempts this sort of discourse, but, through lack of familiarity with the work, is unable to muster many criticisms that will hold up to extensive study. However, this sort of spirited engagement often helps the reader personally and leads to the level of interest that causes one to undertake a more extensive examination. The scholar must give up many of these arguments in order to actually discover what the book is saying, as initial disagreements are often based on a slightly skewed version of the author’s ideas. In many ways, a translator hopes to condense the amount of time an aspiring philosopher must spend in these stages by providing a translation that is faithful and informative. Indeed, the closer the experience of reading the translation is to that of the original, the more likely it is that those initial thoughts and arguments the reader has in response to the book will truly engage the text.

The philosopher also gains much personally from the act of translation. He or she can examine his or her own works with the same exacting criticism, finding unclear sentences and making them intelligible to his or her own readers. Similarly, ideas and arguments that are weak or unnecessary can be easily discarded. Style will be considered and complement the issues discussed in the work, and the book will emerge stronger and more persuasive than if the philosopher had never translated at all. Most importantly, our

philosopher can participate in a conversation that spans language and time in a substantial manner, as another author that deserves translation.

This is why translation has played such a large part in philosophy over the years: translation ultimately brings philosophers to a place where they are ready to think in a sophisticated manner and contribute something of timeless worth to the world. Instead of seeing the difficulties of translation as a burden – thinking only of what is lost – we should look to what a philosopher can find as a translator.