

# SOME ASPECTS OF THE THEORY OF

## T R A N S L A T I O N

by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

Questions about translation are intimately connected with questions about the nature and origins of language. If there was no single primeval language from which all languages are descended, and if each language is unique in itself, then translation is impossible. The fact that translation of some sort from one language to another is possible would suggest that there was one primeval, universal language which has left its traces in all subsequent languages, enabling human beings to share their experience and communicate with each other. Chomsky seems to favour this view, perhaps because it also holds out hopes for a universal transformational grammar. According to Chomsky, "the human mind shares a rule system that allows us to process and interpret expressions over an infinite range."

Many of Chomsky's ideas have been challenged recently, but no satisfactory answer has been found to his question: Why does man talk? Do human beings talk because they have special muscles and bones in their throats which permit articulation? Or do human beings have special muscles and bones in their throats precisely because they can talk? It is not merely a question of the primacy of physiology over biology, or of biology over physiology. For if human beings talk because they have a special kind of throat, then language is a merely physiological phenomenon and is not necessarily a special quality of humans. But if humans evolved a voice box over the years because they wanted to talk, then language is a biological, internal phenomenon, and there could be a case for an original, universal language which all human beings spoke in some unknown period of prehistory. Language, on this view, is natural to human beings and is in the same category as music, drawing, and logic.

But the problem is that while music, drawing, and logic do not need to be translated in order to become comprehensible, language works through a set of codes, and needs decoding at all levels. According to Roman Jakobson, this decoding takes place even when the recipient of the message knows the language, and even if he is a native speaker. For by its very nature, a code demands to be decoded. If this is the case, we go on translating all our lives, even in our own language. Thus translation is an activity both essential and desirable. There is no difficulty in translation as long as two speakers share a common code; or rather, there is some difficulty always, but it is not so great as to substantially prevent comprehension. The real problem arises when two speakers do not share the same code, as happens when we encounter a language we do not know. We have then to learn the codes of the alien language and convert these alien codes into our own.

How much is lost in that conversion? Ideally, it might be thought that nothing should be lost, if all languages share the same ancestor. But in fact quite a lot does get lost, and it is both qualitative and quantitative. Or rather, the loss is so much qualitative that it is hard to say if there is anything merely quantitative about it. But more about this later.

One non-Chomskian view of language holds that language is special to culture. Some would go so far as to say that culture is special to language. That is, if language consists of statements about life and the universe, and culture is those statements in action, then culture is the creation of language. George

Steiner is very nearly of the same view when he says, "*Pain* is not rendered by *bread*. It has to the French ear resonances of want, of radical demand, which the English word does not have." On this view, it is not we who frame a world-view and then express it through language; rather, it is language which shapes our world-view. Here we are very close to the Aristotelian formulation that naming and describing a thing is knowing that thing. This view is found in different shapes in almost all ancient philosophies and pre-ancient beliefs, in which Word was identical with Thing. In a series of challenging articles, building on Nietzsche and Nelson Goodman, Richard Rorty maintains the contingency of language and of selfhood. Rorty says that since truth is expressed through language, and language is man-made, it follows that all truth is man-made. Such a formulation could sound the death-knell for translation, because if all truths are man-made and therefore contingent, then there is no universal truth which can be known and translated. All translations risk becoming the re-creation of our own truths, with no validity whatsoever.

Even if we don't accept Rorty's view that all language is contingent, we are far from solving the problems posed by the currently accepted views about how language works. C. S. Pierce and Ferdinand Saussure wrote in the early years of this century; by now Saussurean linguistics has become the truth of the day. Both Pierce and Saussure stressed the arbitrariness of language. In his *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Edward Said has argued that ideas about the arbitrariness of language were first postulated by the Hispano-Arab philosopher Ibn Hazm. All these views lead us to the dilemma that if language cannot be the repository of absolute truths, then we can know the world only in negative terms--and even those negative terms are man-made.

The relevance of this discussion to translation is obvious. If meanings are arbitrary and not innate, can we be sure what a poet meant? Can we be sure how he was understood by his contemporaries? If we can, do those meanings make sense to us? If we cannot, then are we not imposing our own meaning on poetry when we translate it as we understand it? Perhaps this is the reason why some people hold that a fine translation is also a fine piece of criticism of the translated work. Or, if we are able to determine exactly or even largely what a poet meant, and if we find that this meaning makes no sense to us, then what do we do? An example comes to mind: the ancient Greeks believed that sight consisted of thin rays which emerged from the eye and fell on the object, enabling it to be seen. This Greek belief gave rise to innumerable images of the "thread of sight" (*tar-e nigah*) in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Turkish poetry, and elsewhere too. The concept enabled poets to talk about the power of sight as a physical power, with the beloved's glance functioning like arrows and daggers and swords. Ibn ul-Haitham, an Arab physician and philosopher, proposed that it was not light rays coming out of the eye which made things visible; rather, it was external light falling on an object which enabled images to be formed on the retina. Ibn ul-Haitham's idea gave rise to conceits of things beheld as having been permanently engraved on the beholder's eye. Now how does one make sense in translation of glances as arrows, or of the eyeball as stamped with an image? Whatever you do, you have lost the truth of the original statement.

It has been argued that since all language is arbitrary, all language is essentially metaphorical--thus the translator should try to exchange metaphor for metaphor, rather than word for word. This argument is circular, for if all words are metaphors, there is no such thing as word separated from metaphor. But let's for the time being accept the postulate that the translator should exchange metaphor for metaphor. Metaphors are based on extension by analogy, and analogy arises from a world-view. And your world-view is framed, or at least influenced, by your language. "The word 'dog' bites no one," C. S. Pierce has said. So any analogy between a dog and ferocity is not because of a specific "dogness" in the word "dog." The analogy is because in our world-view dogs are ferocious things. But what about a culture that venerates dogs? In that culture, Auden's lines

In the nightmare of the dark  
All the dogs of Europe bark

will have no sense, or at least not the sense that Auden intended. So in translation the word "dogs" should give way to, say, "wolves" or "hyenas"; and the translation for "bark" will have to change accordingly. But suppose that in our hypothetical translator's culture there are no wolves or hyenas. He looks for the nearest carnivore in his culture and settles for "tigers." But there are no tigers in Europe. So the expression "tigers of Europe" becomes as meaningless as "Indian zebras" or "Arctic peacocks." Furthermore, barking dogs have many homey, human associations too; all these are lost the moment you change the metaphor.

Thus we seem to be damned either way. It would seem that if a literal translation can be meaningless, a nonliteral, or metaphorical, or creative translation risks becoming equally meaningless.

There are translators who say that they are happy so long as they have conveyed the spirit of the original, for the words are untranslatable anyway, or do not do justice to the original when they are translated literally. I will not here discuss the question of whether anyone, much less a translator, has the right and ability to judge exactly in what the spirit of the original consists. But I do want to ask, is the spirit of the original really alienable from the original words? In a phrase like "arrows of glances" (*nigahon ke tir*), what set of words, except the original words themselves, can express the spirit of the original? In Iqbal's line "*aur nigahon ke tir aaj bhi hain dil-nishin*" we have *dil-nishin* (literal meaning: lodging or sitting in the heart, capable of lodging or sitting in the heart), the metaphorical meaning of which is "heart-attracting, heart-captivating." The literal meaning of this phrase, given the presence of *nigahon ke tir* in the beginning of the line, seems to be truer to the spirit of the whole line. So what price the rule that the translator should ignore the literal meaning and go for the "spirit" of the original? Very often, the original and its spirit would seem to be one and the same.

Victor Kiernan translates Iqbal's above-quoted line, "Dart those glances whose barbs stick in the heart where they fall." It is obvious that both the literal and the metaphorical meanings of *dil-nishin* are lost here. And "where they fall" is totally inappropriate, and tautological as well. It has been thrown in just to fill in the metre, and perhaps also to soften somewhat the near-meaninglessness, in English, of the phrase "barbs of glances." Moreover, the Urdu line is a complete unit in itself; by fiddling with its grammar through enjambement, Kiernan loses its finished grace.

Furthermore, the personal preference of the translator, his feel for the source and target languages, and his vision of the author's work as a whole, affect the translation in various ways. In his introduction to *Varieties of Literary Experience*, Stanley Burnshaw provides a telling example: a very simple sentence from Thomas Mann's story "Tonio Kroger." The sentence has been variously translated from the German as follows:

B. Q. Morgan: "And Tonio Kroger journeyed northward."

Kenneth Burke: "And Tonio Kroger travelled north."

H. T. Lowe-Porter: "And Tonio Kroger travelled north."

Mann's own approved version: "And Tonio Kroger went north."

Some might claim that Mann's authorized translation is the weakest. So are we, as translators, justified in ignoring the author's approval and translating the way we think best?

I have said above that there is nothing quantitative in language. Whatever is lost in translation is as qualitative as that which is retained. One need not go so far as Robert Frost, who defines poetry as that

which is lost in translation. But it is clear that a translation is a series of sacrifices and compromises. When poetry is translated, metre, verse form, rhyme, various kinds of visual codes, colloquialisms, word texture, are the first to go. Some of these sacrifices are tolerable; but all these elements contribute to the meaning of the original poem, and to the extent that they are lost, the poem is also lost. Similarly, much of the grammar goes, a loss which again is qualitative. Nazir Ahmad, translating the Qur'an into Urdu in the last years of the previous century, noted that many rules and conventions of Arabic grammar did not exist in Urdu. In the Arabic, Nazir Ahmad pointed out, these rules and conventions play a part in establishing the character of the text, and their loss cannot be made up in any way.

Or consider the simple question of gender. English has gender in a limited degree, and Persian has none. Urdu, Hindi, Panjabi, Arabic, and French have genders in varying degrees. Now the English or Persian author can, while narrating a scene, mask the identity of the characters and thus deceive the reader in order to achieve his ends of creating suspense, or mystery, or uncertainty. Translating such a passage into a gender-using language, the translator cannot but destroy the device. On the other hand, many dialectic conventions and emotional resources available to the gender-using language are not available to the non-gender-using language, and translations into such a language are bound to be the poorer to that extent. Conversely, classical Urdu poetry, by often using the male gender to denote the beloved, achieves a polyvalence not available to a non-gender-using language.

In spite of all these losses, translation must go on. In fact, it must suffer even greater losses sometimes, and accept defeat sometimes. Krishan Chandar, translating Becket's "Waiting for Godot" into Urdu, achieved a *tour de force* in translating the nonsense speech of Pozzo. Instead of rendering the words literally, he produced his own string of nonsense words. That is, rather than matching word or phrase, he matched the mood and effect. But it is not possible to use the same method for Lear's monologues in his madness, or for the comments of the Fool. For those speeches are supercharged with wordplay and allusion; a great deal of method is concealed in the depiction of Lear's crazed condition and the Fool's absurdity.

A successful translation is faithful (or largely faithful) and also creative. This is very nearly an impossibility. But success in translation is a wide spectrum, and while no one can achieve the full width of it, good and lucky ones can achieve much of it. A successful translation is creative, but not in the sense that the translator writes a new poem or novel. The translator recreates the work of art in his own language. He does not do so by killing it and then reviving it in his own tongue. Nor does he recreate it by pretending that he himself is the author of the work, writing in the target language. Ezra Pound, in translating Sophocles, has made the Greek common people speak in Cockney English. This makes for Englishness, but the Greekness is lost. It is true that T. S. Eliot held that considering Pound's original work separately from his translations would be a great mistake, and would imply a greater mistake about the nature of translation itself. But that should apply more to Pound's poetry translations, especially the Chinese and the Latin ones. William Arrowsmith's translations of Aristophanes make the point clear. The Greek rustics and common people in Arrowsmith use a language quite appropriate to the comic theme and tone, but do not use overt slang or "folksy" words. Thus Arrowsmith succeeds in maintaining a necessary distance. A creative translation is one that does not destroy the identity of the original, and sounds different from other works of language in the target language. Yet, while sounding different, it is acceptable and comprehensible to speakers of the target language.

It is therefore wrong to say that a translated poem (the word includes creative writing of all kinds) should not sound like a translation. Muhammad Hasan Askari, a fine translator of novels into Urdu from French and English, was the first to make this point and to declare that the feel of "translatedness" in a translation is no fault. The activity of translating in fact reveals new possibilities in the target

language. It engages the translator in a constant dual battle, a battle with the source language as well as with the target language. Translation is, as George Steiner says, "a living spark, a flow of energy between past and present and between cultures." He says that "immersion, so far as we may experience it, in another language" is the nearest we can come to becoming a second self. But the process of translation also makes us aware of the powers and limitations of our own language. Thus translation becomes creation in its own right.

It has been held that translating novels does not present the same problems as translating poetry. Much of the novel, and certainly the most important part of it, says Stanley Burnshaw, can come through in a translation. Burnshaw says, "The 'poetry' is by no means the only element contributing to the massed-up effectiveness of a foreign novel or play rendered into English." According to him, there are many "abstractable creations" which can come across in translation. It is true that translating fiction may seem easier than translating poetry. But given the very nature of poetry, the translator cannot really hope to succeed more than can a painter who makes a monochrome copy of a polychromatic original. Fiction uses many of the linguistic devices that poetry and drama use. A bad translation of a good stage play will very possibly succeed on the stage, because some dramatic properties do come through in translation, like music. But a novel contains more linguistic devices than it does drama, in spite of Henry James' ambition to write novels which would have the effect of plays. Translations of fiction made into Urdu from Russian or French (whether directly or through English) mostly suffer from the translator's lack of ability to internalize the source language and work from within. The original language does not function as a vitalizer, but as a model. It does not shape the target-language text, but collides with it, damaging both. In a creative translation, the source language should work as a vitalizer of the translator's own language.

If translation is creation, we need not waste our time on vague or inaccurate terms like "trans-creation" or "free rendering." All such terms do nothing but conceal bad translations, or translations which either improve upon the original, or insult it. No translation can be of the same order of excellence as the original. But then, no poem can be the same as another poem. A translation is a work of art in its own right, but it is worthy to be called a translation only if it gives us as much feel of the original as possible.

If that is so, should we say that only creative writers can be good translators? Baudelaire held that "the best of all critics is a poet." And this is true as far as Baudelaire himself is concerned, for many people now regard him as the greatest French critic. But Baudelaire's own translations of Poe are unfaithful, inasmuch as he often translates "upwards." History tells us that there have been good translators and bad translators among both poets and non-poets. No one did better than Scott-Moncrieff with Proust, but Scott-Moncrieff was no novelist. Pope's translation of the *Iliad* is lively and energetic, Chapman's *Iliad* inspired Keats--yet neither of them is a very good translation. Max Hayward wrote no poetry or fiction, but produced some of the greatest Russian translations of our day. In Urdu, we have had some very good poet-translators and fiction-writer-translators. So there is no rule of thumb here.

The better the translator is able to hear the cadences of his two languages, the better he'll be able to translate. A creative translator is at home with the literature and traditions of the language he's translating from; knowing just the work at hand is not sufficient. Equally important, he should be able to think and feel in the output language. Indian translators working in English tend to have the great disadvantage of being unable to tell current, standard English from archaic or bookish English. Yusuf Husain translating Ghalib and Khushwant Singh translating Iqbal are two prominent examples, but there are many more. In fact, there is hardly any substantial translation from Urdu into proper English by a modern Indian translator. A. K. Ramanujan's translations from classical Tamil show how modern

English can be a vehicle for conveying an utterly alien poetic tradition to distant readers. Among Westerners, Frances Pritchett has worked on Ghalib and on the *dastan* of Amir Hamzah.

Is it necessary for the translator to know both languages equally well? There are exceptions like Robert Lowell or W. H. Auden, who knew no Russian yet did some fine translations from that language with the help of native or expert speakers. But no sustained translation activity can be carried on like this. Ideally, only a native speaker of a language can immerse himself in that language. And without such immersion, creative thinking in a language is not possible. Since there are very few *truly* bilingual persons, a team of two would seem to be the optimal solution: each of the two should be a native speaker of one language, and have an excellent knowledge of the other language. Thus each would supplement and complement the other. This is particularly true for translations between Eastern and Western languages, because the culture gap between them is very great.

Translations must go on, to enrich the language as much as the people and their literature. The historian Daniel Boorstin rightly regards translation as a most powerful form of exploration. As Goethe said, "Say what we will of its inadequacy, translation remains one of the most important, worthwhile concerns in the totality of world affairs."

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