

TRANSLATION - THE HERMENEUTIC MOTION

Ian Linklater - UFMG

The 'Hermeneutic' school of textual interpretation attempts to formalize and describe from within the ways in which we interpret the meaning of meaning. It involves the dialectical interactions between writer, reader and language.

Martin Heidegger, who has been hailed as 'The secret king of thought' by Hannah Arendt, has described Hermeneutics as a way of seeking to hear the 'pneuma,' the breath of hidden spirit in language.

In Heidegger's ontology or 'thinking of being,' we may perceive Hermeneutics in action. He has affirmed that Western History may well turn on the translation (the right apprehension) of the word 'to be' in a pre Socratic fragment. In German the noun 'being' is 'sein,' and the verb 'to be' is also 'sein' - as in French and Portuguese, the noun is identical with their infinitive (in English it is identical with a participial form). In other words 'sein,' the verbal noun, is, at its syntactic base, a process, an activity. The noun is, as it were, in George Steiner's phrase, 'the momentary pause or fiction of an act.' It has the same linguistic form as the act because the latter is wholly operative within it.

Heidegger reached back into the origins of crucial Greek terms. The Greeks called 'being' 'ousia' or 'parousia.' This word is normally translated as 'substance.' Wrongly, Heidegger claims. The true translation would have to be a cluster of words comprising 'homestead, at-homeness, a standing in and by itself, a self-enclosedness, an integral presentness or thereness. 'Parousia' tells

us that something is present to us. It stands firmly by itself - it is. Post-Socratic thought never returned to this primal ground of being' - to this illumination of and through the presentness of the existing.

'Ousia,' then, signifies stable and enduring being; being in its dynamic aspect as 'Physis.' Neither of these root words can be replaced by the word 'existence.' 'Existence' is the very opposite of 'being.' It derives from the Greek source which means 'to stand outside of' - to be in a posture external to being. For the Greeks, so long as they were still in the light of 'immediate presentness,' 'existence' signified 'non-being.' The thoughtless habit of using the words 'existence' and 'exist' as designations for being is one more indication of our estrangement from being and from a radical, forceful and definite exegesis of being.

A further linguistic probing of the roots of 'sein' gives us 'esti' (Greek), 'est' (Latin), 'ist' (German), 'is' (English) from Sanskrit 'asus,' which Heidegger translates as 'Life itself, the living, the autonomous.' From the Sanskrit radical 'bh a' or 'bheu' comes Greek 'phuo' (to emerge) as well as 'physis' and 'phyein,' meaning respectively 'nature' and 'to grow.' It is from 'phyein' that there derives the Latin perfect 'fui,' the English 'be' and the German 'bin-bist.' A final word enters into play here. From the Sanskrit 'vasami' we have the German 'wesen,' a polysemic word which Heidegger takes to mean 'to dwell, to sojourn to belong to and in.' From this derives 'gewesen' (has been), 'war' (was) and Heidegger's key word 'wesen' - 'That which is in its active being-that whose being is an indwelling.' From these three stems we may derive these meanings 'to live, to emerge, to endure.' Upon such bases, upon such scrutinies and endeavours to translate the true meaning and connotative ranges of words, Heidegger has erected a whole Metaphysic

calling for a re-thinking of such categories as 'being,' 'becoming,' 'thought,' 'idea' and 'ought,' compelling them back to their forgotten sources.

If we wish to propound a theory of translation, we must be sure that we know what kind of event we are dealing with. Are we dealing, as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis argues, with a situation in which each of the four thousand languages at present current articulates a specific, ultimately irreducible segmentation of reality? In George Steiner's phrase 'Are different languages radically diverse modes of structuring or experiencing reality?' Or are we to accept the view of Zelig Harris and Chomsky that the deep structure analogues of human tongues will be found to outweigh the surface disparities? Between these two poles of argument, we must seek for intermediary and qualified attitudes.

The Monadist position finds early expression (1697) in Leibnitz who suggested that language is not the vehicle of thought but its determining medium, that we think and feel as our particular language impels and allows us to do. He further asserted that tongues differ profoundly, that they are 'perpetual living mirrors of the universe,' each reflecting and structuring experience according to their own habits of cognition.

In Vico's 'philology' 'universalist' and 'monadist' strains co-exist. Vico knew that man enters into active possession of his consciousness, into active cognizance of reality, through the ordering shaping powers of language. All languages traverse the same stages of linguistic usage, from the immediate and the sensory to the abstract. But Vico was acutely perceptive of the autonomous genius of different languages. He was aware that the study of the evolution of language is the study of the human mind itself. He maintained that each different language was made up of almost

infinite particulars that engender and reflect the differing world view of races and cultures. He asserted that a universal logic of language would be falsely reductionist.

Other names should be mentioned. Hamann in his 'Versuch über eine akademische Frage' (1760) focuses upon the proliferation and diversity of languages, and arrives at a conclusion, based upon a physiological hypothesis that each language is an articulate revelation of a specific historical-cultural landscape. Herder, very much a product of the Romantic Period, with its emphasis on a sense of place and history, stated that each language has an irreducible spiritual individuality and that a language would derive great benefits by 'guarding itself from all translations.' An untranslated language, he urged, would retain its vital innocence, and not suffer the debilitating influence of alien blood.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, a man of Renaissance breadth, whose speculations ranged over nearly the whole of extant knowledge, seems to claim that language is a third universe midway between the phenomenal reality of the empirical world and the internalized structures of consciousness. Language is the determinant of man's place in reality. Language, seen in this way, is a universal, but so far as each human tongue differs from every other, the resulting shape of the world is subtly and drastically altered. Each one organizing perception by imposition of its proper framework on the total flux of sensation. Different linguistic framework will divide and channel the sensory flux differently.

The crowning statement of the monadist position, which we have traced from Leibnitz via Humboldt is to be found in the 'metalinguistics' of Benjamin Lee Whorf. His theses are well known. Linguistic patterns determine what the individual perceives in his world and how he thinks about it. These patterns vary widely and

the response in groups using different language systems will be correspondingly different. The resultant 'World Views' will be basically unlike (Whorf calls these 'Thought Worlds'). He maintains that the 'Thought World' makes up 'a microcosm that each man carries about within himself, by which he measures and understands what he can of the Macrocosm.' He claims that, for the human consciousness, there is no such entity as objective physical reality (we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language).

There exists, however, the empirical conviction that the human mind actually does communicate across linguistic barriers. Underlying the formidably historically moulded differences, there must be principles of unity, of invariance of organized form. This seeking for a 'universal grammar is the main task of modern linguistic theory.'

But let me quote Robert A. Hall (1968) 'Linguistic structures do differ very widely indeed among all the attested languages, and so do the semantic relationships which are associated with linguistic structures. The search for linguistic universals has recently come to the fore again, but it is still premature to expect that we can make any except the most elementary observations concerning linguistic universals and expect them to be permanently valid.'

Chomsky, in 'Aspects of the theory of Syntax,' says 'The existence of deep-seated formal universals implies that all languages are cut to the same pattern, but does not imply that there is any point by point correspondence between particular languages. It does not, for example, imply that there must be some reasonable procedure for translating between languages.'

But if we cannot expect to arrive at a generally applicable theory, we may have begun to feel that translation is of the first

importance in our search for comparable meaning between two texts (or two languages). Let me put it this way, adapting the ideas of Walter Benjamin - a translation from Language A into Language B will make tangible the implication of a third active presence - a 'pure language,' which is not contained in any single spoken idiom, something like a 'pure speech' which precedes and underlies both languages (Benjamin refers to this as the Logos). The translator enriches his own language by allowing the source language to penetrate and modify it. He does more - he extends his native idiom towards the hidden absolute of meaning. As Benjamin says 'If there is a language of truth, in which the final secrets that draw the effort of all thinking are held in silent repose, then this language of truth is true language, and it is precisely this language that is concealed, intensively, in translations.'

And so we turn to the Hermeneutic Motion, which has been described by George Steiner as 'The act of elicitation and appropriative transfer of meaning.'

This motion is fourfold. Firstly there is an act of trust. An investment of belief in the meaningfulness, the seriousness of the text we face. 'All understanding, and the demonstrative statement of understanding, which is translation, starts with an act of trust.' (George Steiner). This involves a static contemplation of the source language text in its own phonetic-syntactic-semantic context.

After trust comes aggression. The second move is incursive and extractive. Heidegger tells us that understanding is an act inherently appropriative and therefore violent. The very act of comprehension is an act of translation. Remember St. Jerome's famous image-meaning brought home captive by the translator. This, then, is an act of possession. The translator invades extracts and brings home. He penetrates and transfers.

The third movement is incorporative, an act of importation,

where the receptor language has to make room, to assimilate, to present itself openly, offering all its resources, to embody an integral response. Importations, as we know in a Brazilian Economic context, can be dangerous. They can dislocate the native structure, they can lead to superficial mimicry, so that the receptor language, although laying itself open, must remain on guard, ever conscious of its own being. Much of European romanticism can be seen as a riposte to this sort of domination, an attempt to place an embargo on too much strong foreign influence (in particular, in this case, French neo-classicism).

Our Hermeneutic motion is dangerously incomplete without its fourth stage. In the beginning, resulting from our a-priori trust, we have, as it were, 'leant towards' the confronting text - we have then encircled and invaded it - and we have come home full laden. We must now restore balance- a process of reciprocity. The work translated must be enhanced. The process of translation, like all modes of focused understanding, will detail, illumine and body forth its object. There can be no doubt that the echo enriches, it is not simply a neutral shadow or simulacrum. Authentic translation makes the autonomous virtues of the original more precisely visible. When it surpasses the original, the translation infers that the source text possesses potentialities as yet unrealized by itself. But, ideally, there should be an exchange without loss. The pointers of meaning of cultural interplay, move both ways.

This view of translation as a hermeneutic of trust, penetration, embodiment and restitution derives finally from Aristotle's 'hermeneia' - discourse which signifies because it interprets.

Let me close with a quotation from the preface to that most magnificent of translations - The King James Bible (1611).

'Translation it is that openeth the window to let in the light:
that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel.'