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An ontological approach to translation and untranslatability

Cay Dollerup

The problems I shall discuss have been dealt with by others from the point of view of traditional translation theory.[1]

In my treatment; I shall make some shifts in my approach in order to tackle the issues under review: I first describe some cross-lingual reader response studies, and then briefly refer to selected results. ...// 139 … From there I move on to a discussion of what I think they imply for our views on the forms of texts and translations; and, in turn, to what this means to the definition - or restriction - of the concept of untranslatability.

The present discussion, then, is inspired by our work with experimental reader response research in Denmark, notably two recent studies covering Danish and one other language.[2] The translation procedures have differed somewhat as to whether the other language was Turkish or English.[3] They included group translation, collations, and linguistic revisions, so great attention was paid to setting up texts which were as ”identical” as humanly possible in two different languages. The first study, ”Fairytale” (1978-82), was conducted in Danish and Turkish by national teams, and with Turkish and Danish readers. The other study, ”Folktale”, is conducted in Danish and English. The present article uses information from 63 Turkish readers in ”Fairytale”; and from ten native speakers of English, mostly Americans, seven Danes and three Greenlanders in ”Folktale”, respectively. All readers reported on their experience of three stories during the actual reading.[4]

Two of these texts are used in both studies; although there are differences between the Turkish and the Danish versions, I consider it permissible cautiously to refer to some of the material from Turkey collected in ”Fairytale”, as far as these two tales are concerned.

(a) The Danish folktale, *Per Smed’s Whip* is from 1876; in it an old man gets his revenge for being cuckolded by his young wife. (The story was used in both studies.)

(b) The Turkish quest tale, *The Golden Apple*, is from 1939; it deals with a girl who must steal a gold apple from Beyoglu, a young man. She goes to his country, befriends him, steals the apple and flies home; she is eventually carried back to him so that he can marry her. (The story was used in both studies.)

(c) The last story is the Greenlandic tale *The Barking Ones* (1936/37). …// 140 … It deals with a woman who lives with a bear and later betrays it. (Used only in ”Folktale”.)

I have argued elsewhere that in discussions of quality in translation, it is often sufficient to distinguish between different layers in a source-language message, viz. (a) **a linguistic layer**, (b) **a content layer**, and (c) **the intention**.[5]

We can use the concepts of the linguistic layer and the content layer as starting points for our discussion of the readers’ responses to these tales.

As for **the linguistic layer,** then, the Danish tale is about a man called Per Smed. Both Danish and American readers - the latter students in Denmark - immediately recognise that the name is Scandinavian. However, Danes are sometimes very specific and refer to e.g. Ludvig Holberg, a prominent writer in Danish literature in the 18th century; and occasionally to the feudal system. Conversely, one American student gets associations to the expression ‘going schmed’ which means having sex. The crux is that the native languages open up possibilities of different associations which cannot be ”neutralised”, as it were. In this case we could, for instance, not translate the Danish ‘smed’ into the etymologically correct English ‘smith’ - for the social standing of the artisan at a Danish feudal manor house was not the same as that of his English counterpart.

We meet with a similar problem in the Turkish tale. The male protagonist’s name, Beyoglu, means a rich man’s son [bey-oglu]. So it is no surprise that Turkish readers apparently find him fine all the way, while some Danish and American readers believe him to be a monster or a troll until - after several pages - he is described as a young man. Once more it is hard to see how you can establish equivalence at the linguistic level to evoke the ”same” response.

There is more to it: in the original Turkish tale, there is a tenuous but consistent string of references to religion, to Allah, and to supernatural powers. …// 141 … These references occur at crucial episodes: when the girl offers to go in quest of the golden apple; when she passes a bridge; when she wants to stay overnight with an old woman who later gives her magic gifts; at the moment she protects her virginity by avoiding to doff her dress; and, eventually, when she is married. These features are sometimes - at least in part - considered religious by Turkish readers, but never by Danes or Americans. [6]

In reading the Greenlandic tale, Greenlanders found it easy to recreate the Greenland scenery. However, both Danes and Americans - who had no clue to the whereabouts of the tale - found it hard to reconcile what they read with ”reality”, e.g. that a bear would catch seals, or that there were mountains - which one reader even thought were wooded - close by the sea.

We meet with similar differences at **the content layer:** At the end of the Danish tale, the cuckolded man takes back his adulterous young wife without any ado. Danes take this to be realistic - if not really what they had expected. American readers waver a bit, though one characterises the ending as pretty mature. And the Turks comment that this is highly unusual and the wife should not be forgiven.

In the Turkish tale a horse is beaten to death. There appear to be no Turkish comments on this feature, whereas both Danes and Americans object seriously.

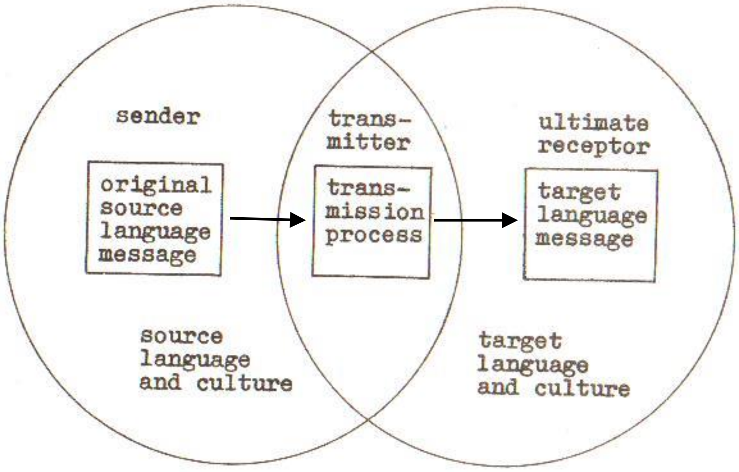
And, when we take the Greenlandic tale as a whole, Danes and Americans may call it fascinating - or disgusting - but whatever they do, they never rank it top of the three stories, whereas Greenlandic readers favour it.

These select examples suffice to show that the division into three layers of the message is clearly inadequate for a broader discussion of the fullness of the readers’ responses in different languages. Questions of what ostensibly appear to be purely **linguistic** signals transform into something infinitely more complex in the individual human experience of the text. And similarly **content** is not only content but something which - in the human experience - combines into interpretative wholes, cultural backgrounds, etc. …// 142 …

In order to reconcile this with our ideas of translation I suggest that we should establish a more rigid a attitude to what constitutes translation.

I am sure we agree that translation is communication. **Figure 1** shows how a message in the source-language moves from the sender to the target-language receptor.

Fig. 1



I suggest, however, that in some contexts, this sketch is misleading, e.g. when we talk about what can be translated or not in a source-language text. Or what was translated or could not be translated in the target-language text.

The inadequacy of the concept of translation as interlingual communication only seems obvious to me when we refer to the readers' responses: They are not reflections on translations. Neither the original readers of the texts in the source-language, nor the readers of the texts in the target-language are aware of the potential existences of experiences of the texts in other languages.

The readers' responses are expressions of active, **dynamic** readings, of fusions between a text and readers in one given language, independent of translation, and - as far as the individual experience of it is concerned - of limited duration: it has a beginning, middle, and an end.

Of course this experience is based on something eternal, viz. a **static,** typographical text where we have black letters presented in series of words on white paper in some language. However, this text comes to life only in the dynamic flare of the reading process of those who read the same static text - independent of what the text ”is” - in different languages.

And yet the texts in different languages do have indisputable, indissoluble ties to one another. Nonetheless, these last ties are irrelevant to the dynamic existences of the texts:
as literature, they exist only by being read, and this reading is affected by the readers, not by the fact that there has been a translation. This is why the model I set up for layers in a text meant for translation is inadequate in the present discussion: once we accept that there is more to it than the purely static text, we must supplement our conceptions of textual existence with the readers' different realities, different communities, and different cultures. …// 143 … And although I have limited myself to literary texts, I also suggest that in the reading of any text we must be aware of the co-existence of the readers' backgrounds, i.e. their education, their literacy, their technological knowledge, etc.[7]

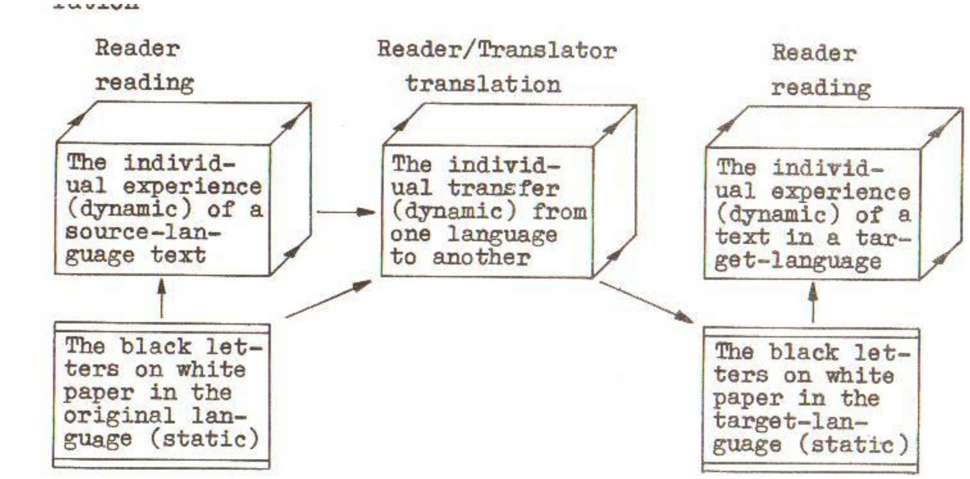
But to return to the **dynamic** forms of a text: the readings within one language are not the only **dynamic** component in connection with translation:

For the indisputable and indissoluble ties I just mentioned, are established in the process of translation; this is also dynamic: the text is experienced by the **translator** and transferred to another language. This transfer is based on the static source-language text, which the translator experiences in the same way as any other reader in the source-language. The transfer process which takes place is, admittedly, largely hidden to the eye: it depends on the transmitters' competence, their knowledge, their understanding of the original; their abilities to express themselves within the linguistic, syntactical, and semantic systems of the target language.

Although there are similarities between the dynamic process of translation and the dynamic forms of texts in reading, there are also major differences:

The translation process is a process of limited duration and fairly well-defined in terms of time of space in so far as the individual static text in the target language is ”made” by one transmitter (or, of course, a group of transmitters): i.e. the translator cannot go on changing and rewriting a text indefinitely.[8] Unlike what is the case with the reading process, there is no intersubjective, static counterpart to the dynamic translation process. Conversely, the dynamic experience of a text in any language is potentially always easily repeatable, since various readers can experience the same typographically intersubjective text over the years. …// 142 …

A more adequate sketch for discussions of translated texts, their interrelationships, and of the dynamic (shown with depth) and static forms (shown as one-dimensional rectangles) would therefore look as follows (Figure 2).


Reader
reading
Reader/Translator
translation
Reader
reading
The individual experience (dynamic) of a source-language text
The individual transfer (dynamic) from one language to another
The individual experience (dynamic) of a text in a target-language
The black letters on white paper in the original language (static)
The black letters on white paper in the target-language (static)

This drawing thus illustrates the source-language text which can be recreated dynamically in human experiences with native speakers over and over again, from static, printed, forms: black words on a white page.

Similarly texts derived from the translation process in target-languages will spring briefly into dynamic existence in human experiences in the target-language culture, independent of the process of transfer.

But the process of transfer is more limited in terms of time and space: it is mostly individual; straddling two languages at the same time, this is where we find the phenomenon of intranslatatability; it is not part of neither static, nor dynamic texts in the source- or target-language, but something which turns up exclusively when two language systems meet in the transfer of a text: untranslatability is part of the process, or of the assessments of the process of transfer (no matter whether this is the actual translation or criticisms of it).

I think it is illogical to believe that untranslatability is connected with the static forms of texts - for they cannot be discussed as anything other than wavelengths and typographical signs. And the dynamic forms in reading are part of an experience independent of translation: therefore, in terms of time and space, untranslatability is inseparable from the actual translation process and criticism of it.

To conclude: the reader is a component part of the only form of a text which we can discuss meaningfully as a message. As readers with different linguistic backgrounds experience texts in fusions with their own personalities, and their own social, and cultural backgrounds, these dynamic texts are different in different languages.

Accordingly, untranslatability exists only as an integral part of the process of translation itself: it is part of translation. This being so, it also follows that untranslatability is in itself unstable: hovering between languages and literatures, and intimately connected with the linguistic middleman, the translator, any change in this tangle, may create - or bring forth - new words, phrases, concepts, and, consequently, areas of intranslability, as well as of translatability, in new processes of translation.

… // 146

Notes and references

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1 I refer to e.g. Wilss, Wolfram. *The Science of Translation: Problems and Methods.* Gunter Narr: Tübingen 1985. Chapter 7. I wish to call attention to the fact that on closer inspection Jumpelt's list from 1961 of principles for literary translation all centre more or less obviously on the process of trans fer. At the above-mentioned conference, many papers touched the problems discussed here. Thus, e.g. S. Albert challenged the concept of "equivalence" with other - but related - epistomological points in "On Translational Equivalence".

2 For further descriptions, see other articles posted on this homepage.

3 Briefly: 4 persons were involved in the establishment of the "near identical" texts in Danish and Turkish in "Fairytale" (see Dollerup, Doltas, Reventlow, Rosenberg Hansen, Sevgen. *The Three Tales Chosen, the Establishment of the Texts and the Charting of Deviations.* Educational Resources Information System: Urbana Ill. 248 475; 1982/85). The translation procedure in "Folktale" are described in publication 118 on this homepage.

4 The information on Turkish responses derives from Doltas, Dilek & Cevza Sevgen. *Introspection and Essay Studies Conducted in Turkey.* ERIC 248 476; 1982185.

5 In "Constraints on interlingual transmission". In Wollin, Lars and Hans Lindquist. Eds. *Translation Studies in Scandinavia*. Malmo: Gleerup/Lund Studies in English 75, 1986, 71-79. …// 117…

6 There are exceptions: one female reader thought the story dealt with karma. And a group of literary students who did the story in class after having prepared it at home concluded that it was about gaining access to sexuality in a legitimate and socially permissible way.

7 I do not wish to elaborate this point because it would obscure the main thrust of my argument. But "identity" of transferred texts is impossible no matter what type of texts we are dealing with: differences in social set ups (in e.g. social stratification) make it impossible to hit "an identical" audience in other countries. Literacy rates, educational backgrounds, etc. will add to the difficulties. Text typologies (Reiss) and the different textual paradigms (Neubert) in different languages also make the concept of "identity" of transfer impossible. In my opinion the starting point for discussions of "equivalence" is that "identity" is an unattainable ideal - which may, however, serve as a useful anchor for discussions.

8 Of course, the same text may be translated several times, even by the same translator. But the transfer processes are viewed in isolation in the present context.