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DO YOU HAVE A THEORY OF TRANSLATION? YOU BET YOU DO!

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DO YOU HAVE A THEORY OF TRANSLATION? YOU BET YOU DO![1]

By Sergio Viaggio

Let us go directly to the point. Which of the b) texts can be considered “translations” of the relevant a) texts, and, if more than one, which may be considered the “better” translations?

Texts a):	Texts b.i):
The problem has troubled translation theory historically. People practiced translation, but were never quite sure what they were practicing.	El problema ha perturbado históricamente la teoría de la traducción. La gente traducía, pero nunca estaba totalmente segura de qué estaba practicando.
Los documentos deben estar verificados fehacientemente.	Documents must be verified so that there is no doubt about their authenticity.
No smoking.	No fumar.
Do not lean on the doors.	No se apoyen en las puertas.
Every cloud has a silver lining.	Toda nube tiene una capa de plata.
The goggles that will not make a spectacle of yourself. [2]	Las gafas que no lo pondrán en ridículo.
Dear President Pérez,[3]	Querido Presidente Pérez:
The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain.[4]	En España, la lluvia cae principalmente en la pradera.
The price you're asking is highway robbery.[5]	El precio que pide es un robo a mano armada.
Texts a):	Texts b.ii):

The problem has troubled translation theory historically. People practiced translation, but were never quite sure what they were practicing.	El problema ha aquejado a la teoría de la traducción durante toda su historia. Los traductores traducían, pero sin estar jamás totalmente seguros de qué estaban haciendo.
Los documentos deben estar verificados fehacientemente.	Documents shall be duly certified.
No smoking.	Prohibido fumar.
Do not lean on the doors.	No apoyarse en las puertas.
Every cloud has a silver lining.	No hay mal que por bien no venga.
The goggles that will not make a spectacle of yourself.	Las gafas protectoras elegantes.
Dear President Pérez,	Excelentísimo Señor:
The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain	El rey que hay en Madrid se fue a Aranjuez.[6]
The price you're asking is highway robbery.	El precio me parece francamente excesivo.

There are several possible answers:

- (Some or all of) the texts in column b.i) are not, strictly speaking, translations of the texts in column a): they are simply literal “transpositions.”
- (Some or all of) the texts in column b .i) are all (better or worse) translations of the texts in column a).
- (Some or all of) the texts in column b. ii) are not, strictly speaking, translations of the texts in column a): they are too “free” – even if they do work.
- (Some or all of) the texts in column b. ii) are translations of the texts in column a) regardless of their “liberties.”

Each of these answers and sub-answers (i.e., if not all, then which b.i) / b.ii) texts?) will be based on a different theory of translation; so, if you think you have an answer, then you do have a theory – much as the sheer idea may displease or surprise you. If you had not realized it, it is because your theory is not explicit. That does not make it “wrong,” but it does prevent it from being “criticized,” that is, confronted with practice, compared with other theories and –crucially– being perfected and developed if basically right, or discarded if totally wrong.

Why would the b.i) texts **not** be considered translations? They say “the same thing,” i.e., they convey the same propositional content; moreover, they do so in a way that is not ungrammatical – or even awkward– and they can be perfectly understood by any minimally sophisticated reader. If you agree, then, as mine, your theory says that the main –if not necessarily the only– requisite of translation is “sameness of meaning,” understood basically as sameness of propositional content: [7] no “sameness of meaning” – no translation!

In this light, then, *El problema ha aquejado a la teoría de la traducción durante toda su historia. Los traductores traducían, pero sin estar jamás totalmente seguros de qué estaban haciendo* is as much a translation of *The problem has troubled translation theory historically. People practiced translation, but were never quite sure what they were practicing* as *El problema ha perturbado históricamente la teoría de la traducción. La gente traducía, pero nunca estaba totalmente segura de qué estaba practicando*. The difference is that the former “sounds” better, which in turn has necessitated some liberties, but not too many: a little cheating is always to be expected. This means that this latter text would also count as a “translation.”

If you agree to both points above, then according to your theory a translation is such by virtue of its saying “the same thing” as the original, and, barring translational “mistakes,” it will be better the better it “sounds” – i.e. the better it is as a text in the target language.

But, as it happens, b.i) translations are “better” for my specific purposes than b.ii) ones, since my point is, precisely, to show that they would be not as apt as the latter if their purpose had been the same as that of the originals.

If you agree, then your theory says, also, that translations are not good or bad, better or worse in the abstract: What makes translations better or worse is not necessarily that they “sound” better, but that they better fulfil their intended functionality, or, less pretentiously, that they better fit the purposes pursued by the translator (on his own or on somebody else’s behalf). The speaker’s lapses normally corrected must be reproduced (*n.b.*: **reproduced**, not **translated!**) in judicial interpretation when the accused is being interpreted before the court. *Ditto* many factual or formal mistakes in sworn translations. If your theory made no allowance for this *caveat*, I suggest you better accommodate it.

This brings us to the translations of *Los documentos deben estar verificados fehacientemente*. In this instance, *Documents shall be duly certified* may be deemed too “liberal” with respect to *Documents must be verified so that there is no doubt about their authenticity*. But the latter is too verbose *vis-à-vis* the original and, although it “explains” *fehacientemente*, it does not quite “say” it (because there is no equivalent in English). In either case, we can vote for or against either text being a true “translation.” Which posits the rather uncomfortable question: What is a translator to do – especially if absolute sameness of meaning is of the essence– when there is **no** equivalent, and therefore, no altogether “faithful” translation, and he still wants the job? If some cheating is to be expected, how much cheating is tolerated? If your theory allows for as much cheating as necessary in order to convey “the same thing” (even if with the crooked walking stick of a footnote or a clarifications in brackets), you are in business. If not, then either you switch theories or give up the job.

On its part, there is, in principle, nothing wrong with *No fumar*, except that such notices in the target language/culture normally read *Prohibido + infinitive*. Functionality advises, rather than necessitates a minor “manipulation” – the kind of “cheating” that is, more than expected, welcome or even demanded.

What about *No se apoyen en las puertas / No apoyarse en las puertas combo*? Which one is a better –or, if you prefer, more idiomatic or functional– “translation”? If you answered b.ii) then you have never taken the Madrid *metro*. If you chose b.i), take the Buenos Aires *subte* and be disabused. What may be idiomatic or functional to some users of a language may not be so to others, and the divides (there are quite a few) are not necessarily geographical: they can be social (professional, age- and class-related, etc.), or individual.

So far, then, most theories will converge on defining both texts b.i) and b.ii) as “translations,” whilst functional theories will deem b.ii) renditions “better” in the relevant context and linguistic theories will vote for their b.i) counterparts regardless of it.[8] Your answers so far will tell you which theoretical pole attracts you the most.

But you may also deem that sameness of meaning is not enough: meaning has to be conveyed in such a way that it is properly understood. This will lead you into rather murky waters. Are *Toda nube tiene una capa de plata* or, even more so, *Las gafas que no lo pondrán en ridículo* understood “properly”? I submit not. Not, that is, if *Toda nube tiene una capa de plata* is meant to work colloquially and understood “on the go” (the semantic[9] translation is not opaque at all, but it will take some additional time and effort to process, plus it is pragmatically marked in a different way: as bizarre rather than colloquial!). Not, indeed, if *Las gafas que no lo pondrán en ridículo* is meant to work as a caption in an advertisement whose purpose is, precisely, to “sell” the product to consumers in the second language/culture. But, regardless of whether they work better as a rendition of a popular saying or a recreation of an ad, are *No hay mal que por bien no venga* and *Las gafas protectoras elegantes* a “translation” of *Every cloud has a silver lining* or *The goggles that will not make a spectacle of yourself*?

If your answer is “yes,” then your theory says that, provided function is maintained, well nigh everything goes, since the only equivalence to be found between any pair of the above texts is *the goggles/las gafas*.

Things can get quite rougher. As pointed out, *Dear President Perez* was the actual heading of a letter addressed to then Venezuelan president Carlos Andrés Pérez that I had to translate for a client, a PR company that had been retained by the President to boost his rather threadbare public image. In it, the experts explained the strategy they had developed to that effect. Now I bet any minimally competent translator would be caught dead before formally calling “dear President Perez” *Querido Presidente Pérez*, and not only because this is not the way to address such a personality in the Spanish-speaking culture(s): It is not simply a matter of perpetuating tradition, but of not antagonizing the potential reader – lest he will be “angry” and not pay due attention to the translated message, or, worse, chastise the translator![10] Maybe you had not quite thought of it this way. But why is it, in fact, that translators tend to “manipulate” form, almost invariably –in Spanish-speaking cultures, towards a more formal style– if not to cater to the potential reader’s acceptability criteria in order to ensure smooth communication – or protect their own butt? In this specific case, most Spanish translators would write *Excelentísimo Señor*, or, even, *Su Excelencia, el Presidente de la República de Venezuela, don Carlos Andrés Pérez*, next, in a separate line, *Excelentísimo Señor*, and then the letter proper. The letter itself would be thereafter “manipulated” into a more formal style than the one we can surmise would follow such a heading in the original. This, as we know, is basic stuff... or isn’t it?

Let us leave the answer in abeyance for a while. Next, by virtue of what theory can *El rey que hay en*

a-functional – i.e., completely useless on stage. Sure, you may say, everybody knows that too! Do they? Then why do so many translators adamantly seek to translate texts when their “translation” is absolutely useless –if not altogether self-defeating!– for the purposes in hand?

As we can see, the theory governing this “translation” is akin to the one we followed when rendering the *goggles* ad – except that here there is no sameness of meaning at any level whatsoever. Still, one can find theoretical refuge in the fact that, one way or the other, what counts in either case is function, and function is preserved in both cases – even if at the cost of sameness of propositional content or, less euphemistically, at the cost of “translation.” But have not all b.ii) texts striven to do just that: preserve function in their context? And have not all **b.i)** texts sought, also, to do just that: preserve function in **their** context? Would we not –wittingly or unwittingly– be falling prey to a theory according to which, provided function is preserved, anything, literally anything goes – whereby sameness of meaning is **not** a requisite of translation? And if you now backtrack with a disingenuous disclaimer to the effect that “everything goes sometimes” or that “not quite everything goes all the time,” it will take you a lifetime to find a way out of the theoretical maze: Imagine Newton having discovered that most things are attracted to most things sometimes: he would have come up with the Law of Occasional Gravitation! You may, of course, retort that you could not care less, since you will blissfully continue doing what you do and let obsessed theoreticians like me lock abstract horns on it.

But there’s worse to come.

The price you’re asking is highway robbery. Let us assume that, in the interpreter’s analysis, this could be a good deal for the buyer/client if only he (the buyer) can negotiate cunningly. What if the interpreter faithfully renders this outburst as *El precio que pide es un robo a mano armada*? The seller takes offence, the communication breaks down and the deal is off. Is this in the client’s interest? Hardly. The interpreter would be doing him no favour by interpreting “faithfully.” A rendition like *El precio me parece francamente excesivo* would be definitely better for the client’s purposes in hiring the interpreter in the first place: Not simply understanding what the potential seller says or having him understand what he says, but buying the apartment at a reasonable price. A few paragraphs above I spoke of “self-defeating” translations: here is a glaring case in point! Of course, the interpreter would be assuming full responsibility for his “manipulation” – but certainly no more than, say, a physician who, bearing the patient’s interest in mind, decides to amputate his leg. This case brings clearly out the interest a good mediator should take in the metacommunicative purposes and, therefore, success of communication – regardless of what he may actually do on this basis.[11] Here, loyalty to his client[12] (an ethical concern) takes clear precedence over faithfulness to his “text.” My question is: Is this case of “manipulation” different from the *Dear President Pérez/Excelentísimo Señor* example? I suggest it is, in essence, a matter of degree. In both instances the translator/interpreter would be catering to the interlocutor’s acceptability criteria in order to ensure smooth, and eventually successful, communication. If your theory does not make room for such interventions, I, for one, would never trust you with a letter to a potential employer or hire you to help me buy an apartment.

I submit, then, that **all** b.ii) texts “work” better in their context than would b.i) texts, regardless of whether we consider them translations. Insofar as you stop agreeing somewhere down the list, then your theory diverges from mine. This would be a simple academic matter were it not for the fact that, governed by such different strategies, our “translations” would become themselves ever more different – which shows that every translation, or, more strictly, “act of translation, good or bad, is the practical incarnation of a theory, more coherent and apt or less, conscious or unconscious, explicit or not. I venture to posit that your disagreement would be not so much on whether these renditions “work” better, but rather on whether they theoretically are, indeed, translations, and whether it **practically** behoves a translator to produce them *qua* translator (i.e. *qua* “translations”) if they are not; that is, whether a “translator” has the “right” to do something other

than “translating.” What would the company addressing President Pérez, the translation agency hiring the translator, President Pérez himself, “My Fair Lady”’s producer (or the public!), the buyer or the seller think? Would they appreciate your “manipulation” or take you to task for it? Your theory, I submit, ought to be a function of the hypothetical answer. If it is not, you may be wise to revise it.

As you can see, unless you stepped down at the first stop, no matter how far you may have followed me down the list of examples, you are amidst a theoretical conundrum (which may not have bothered you at all until now). If we assert that translation must ensure sameness of meaning and, therefore, *yes* can only be translated as *yes*, the jacket is way too straight. If we say simply that, depending on context, *yes* can be “translated” as *no*, it becomes way too loose. Is there a way out? I think so. We can, indeed, aver, with those who left our train of thought at the first dilemma, that a “translation” is such when it says “the same thing” in a different language, whereby, since some ways of saying the same thing are better than others (in the same or different contexts), some translations will be better than others. End of story.

Anything else, regardless of functionality, is not a translation but an adaptation, a recreation^[13], a completely new text with the same functionality or simply nothing. End of story.

A translator’s job being to translate, everything else is done by somebody else. End of story.

So if you want to localize your software don’t seek a “translator,” but a computer specialist with bilingual and bicultural competence; if you want to adapt for singing the lyrics of a song, don’t look for a “translator,” but a lyrics (re-)writer (or, by the same token, if you want to translate a poem **as a poem**, don’t even think of a translator, find yourself a bilingual poet!), and if you want the interpreter to help you buy a cheap apartment, don’t hire an “interpreter” but a sly negotiator who speaks both languages.

Needless to say, translators, including you and me, my unknown friend, do not normally relinquish all those “non-translational” jobs and blissfully adapt, recreate, add, clarify, make explicit, turn implicit, write something completely new or decide to omit altogether whole chunks of information at every turn... My theoretical question is: do we stop being translators? Are we only intermittent translators? And what are we when we decide not to “translate”? And my practical corollary is: may we “legitimately” do so, and, if so, up to what point and under which circumstances?

We can compromise: Understood in its widest possible sense, as the product of a translator’s work, as a “translational act,” “translation” may or may not entail “sameness of meaning” at any specific level – it may end up in complete “absence of meaning,” for instance, when the innocent joke that becomes offensive if translated or information that is useless or redundant for the new reader is simply omitted. We, professional translators, on our part, would know that in this case we would be speaking of “translation” *pour la gallerie*, since the client will probably not notice or care about the difference. But we would also know that whenever we shirk from sameness of meaning we would be doing something other than “translating.” Can we give it a name? What are we **always**, even when we depart from translating?

My answer: **interlingual mediators**, who, as such, basically translate, since, basically, what is expected of a “translator” is that he say (more or less and, again, basically) “the same thing” in his new text. But by far not always. Of course, if it is necessary or convenient that the reader understand what the original says warts and all, then we will try and reproduce in our texts all the warts (as a judicial interpreter does when interpreting the accused before a court); but then, if it is necessary or convenient that the new reader understand that the goggles are not unbecoming and no rendering of the semantic meaning proves functional, we may simply say that they are elegant.

If we consider essential that the reader find the text funny, then we will try and make him laugh whatever it takes. If we think that he ought to understand the semantic meaning of a text, then we will decide to stick to the semantics of the original, no matter how awkward the result. If we feel that what counts is not what the song “says,” but the point it makes, then we shall endeavour to make the same or a similar point any which way. If, in our judgement, it is not the point that counts, but what the song “says,” then we will not give a hoot about “singability” (as is the case with supertitles in opera). Obviously, not all translators will agree on any specific way of “translating” any specific texts, (we ourselves may think one way at one time and another at a different time – for instance, when editing our translation) but they will always –if unbeknownst to them– end up saying, **on the basis of the original, a) what the intended interlocutor is meant to understand b) the way it is meant that he understand it** – regardless of whether it is the same, a similar or a different thing, or none at all. That is the “constitutive”^[14] rule of interlingual mediation; the name of the game translators play always, even when they cannot, do not or choose not to “translate.”

Naïve translators will systematically think that the new reader must become aware of “the full meaning of the original”: what the original says, all that the original says, nothing but what the original says, and –God willing, the target language permitting and their acumen enabling– as the original says it. Most inane, awkward or, at best, not altogether functional translations are symptomatic of such theory. More sophisticated practitioners will be less awed by the original and more mindful of the larger metacommunicative context. Insofar as they are, they will be less afraid of “departing” from the original and ever bolder to (re-)“create” their own texts – provided such “freedom” and boldness are best for the purposes in hand.

If you are one of the latter ilk, this is what you would normally do: First and foremost, you would (try to) determine the required functionality in the target language/culture (on your own, or in consultation with colleagues or the author/commissioner/reader). Second, you would establish clearly whom you are beholden to professionally – where your loyalty lies, whose interests are to be prioritized by your rendition. Thirdly, you would determine the deontological limits of your discretionality under the specific circumstances (there are certain things that you will not do because your professional ethics won’t allow you to). And, fourthly, you would be ready, then, to be as literal or to take as many “liberties” as you professionally deem fit. In other words, you would be ready to exercise your professionally liable discretion (you may, indeed, call it “freedom”).

Vis-à-vis the original, the exercise of this professional discretion will lead you at every turn to say something more, something less, something different or nothing at all. “Translation” proper, saying “the same thing,” will be an ideal ground zero, a point of reference from which you will have no qualms in departing even if you could stick to it, provided departing from it is the best option for the task in hand. This will not, in itself, guarantee that your “translation” will be apt as a chunk of speech or text (that is a matter of talent and ability), but, unless these pre-requisites are in place, no amount of linguistic prowess or terminological precision will carry the day.

To sum up, then, if (as, incidentally, mine does!) your theory says that a “translation” is such if and only if it says “the same” as the original, but that, as a “translator,” you ought not, therefore, do anything but “translate,” you will soon be replaced by a machine: they are getting dangerously close to doing just that as well as you, but much faster and cheaper. May I urgently suggest that you switch theories.

If, on the other hand, your theory says simply that a “translation” is such by being duly functional, and that, therefore, (in some contexts) anything goes, many a client will take you to task for not having “translated” and you will be at a loss to defend your choices.

If, instead, your theory says that a “translation” is indeed such by saying “the same thing,” but that “saying the same thing” is a different game from “saying the right thing under the circumstances,” and that what behoves you, even if you call yourself a “translator,” is precisely that, you stand a much better chance of a) making the right choices[15], and b) come up with a coherent explanation thereof – one, moreover, that will help educate the less obdurate clients into accepting our own professional norms[16] the way they have no problem in accepting those of dentists or plumbers. More transcendently, you will be propounding a new vision of your professional endeavour: not any longer simply to enable communication, but to facilitate it – a hell of a difference!

POST MORTEM

This theory brings with it what, to my mind, is a revolutionary insight: At whatever level one seeks it or tries to define it, equivalence, the bane of translation theorists and practitioners since time immemorial, is not the condition of translational activity, but its consequence, and, therefore, a sheer *post facto* statistical coincidence, made more rife, precisely, because so many translators fall prey to its myth. I dare say that most “bad” translations are such not because they lack a sufficient degree of equivalence, but because they pursue it to the most outlandish, nay, ridiculous lengths.

One last thought: There is no human activity that is not governed by an implicit or explicit theory. The problem with implicit theories is that they cannot be criticized, compared, checked against practice and developed. A theory is pretty much like a map: it will not “take” you anywhere, but it will help you find the best way according to your needs: the shortest, or the easiest, or the fastest, or the most scenic, or the cheapest, or the most challenging. The decision is always yours. But only a map that shows, describes and explains all the possible roads will allow you to make a knowledgeable, educated choice.

Sergio Viaggio

Born in Buenos Aires, in 1945. MA (*cum laudae*) in Russian Language and Literature, Moscow Peoples’ Friendship University, 1971. UN Spanish Translator, 1974; UN Spanish Interpreter, 1975; Chief, Interpretation Section, UN Office at Vienna, 1991; retired 2005; freelance translator and interpreter since then. Helped design and test the Spanish Interpreter Examination for the Supreme Court of the State of New Jersey, 1989. Has taught at some 20 schools of T&I in the Americas, Europe, Africa and Asia; has published more than 50 articles and papers in five languages; has published a book: “Teoría general de la mediación interlingüe” Alicante, 2005 (English version: “A General Theory of Interlingual Mediation” Frank & Timme Verlag, Berlin, 2006). Founding Member and first Vice President of the European Society of Translation Studies; member of AIIC. Professor Emeritus, Universitat de Vic, 2005; Doctor Honoris Causa, Bath University, 2007.

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