

SOME ASPECTS OF POEMS AND TRANSLATIONS

When an English writer composes poems in English which are difficult for readers to understand, sometimes the writer will also be puzzled, in trying to understand what are the problems for the reader. The writer is often not in a good position to inspect his or her compositions from the reader's point of view, because the writer is on the inside of the text, whereas the reader is on the outside. These difficulties are more severe when the reader is not a native-English speaker; this means that unusual forms of language use will give extra trouble in comprehension, and also the custom and practice for writing poems within the context of a literary culture will be unfamiliar. This in turn means that reading poems written in a foreign language is one of the hardest tasks for a reader, and if the original writer is not part of the distant past but still working in the present day, then there is likely not to be much available guidance or background. Even the dictionaries and reference works may not be sufficiently up-to-date to be very helpful (try google!). Teachers of a foreign language often say to their students, if you can read and understand poems written in the foreign language, then you will have insights into the very heart of another culture; but the tasks are often very hard, and also frustrating, because it is mostly not possible to know whether an attempted understanding of a poem has been successful or not.

This means that literary translation is often an important source of help. With good translations, a reader who does not understand the original language, or who has only imperfect knowledge, can gain some comprehension of poems from a different culture, and students of the foreign language can be assisted in following the original text if they can have a good translation side-by-side with the original. Translating poems into poetic form in a foreign language is difficult in many ways, and no individual translation can be satisfactory in every direction at once. There is very often a conflict between the effort to convey the meaning in a recognisable way, and the effort to communicate the formal aspects of composition, to show the shapes and patterns and energies of the writing as much as its meaning. Translation is for sure a noble art, making bridges for readers who want to cross the divide between their own culture and those cultures which are situated in other parts of the world; and yet a material bridge is passive and inert, without any life of its own, whereas a poetic translator must try to make a living construction with its own energy and powers of expression, to convey the active experience of a foreign original text. Poetry is thus a special challenge for the translator, because as well as having a very good technical knowledge of the foreign language, the translator must have a lively imagination and a good sense of poetry as a practice of writing which in different forms is found all over the world.

What then can be the attitude of the original writer to such efforts of translation, and can there be an effective relationship between the writer and the translator when the work of translation is in progress? Here I report my own experience, which will be different from other writers in different

circumstances. I have been extremely fortunate over a period of many years to have worked closely with very gifted and dedicated translators, and in most cases when I have had some knowledge of the translator's native tongue I have been able to collaborate with the practical work in some detail. I have assisted actively in translations of my work into French, Italian, German, and Chinese, to take four examples. The first three languages are all parts of the Indo-European group of languages and share many basic features in common. And yet there are not only almost completely different vocabularies, but the differing patterns of syntax and idiom and discourse structure present well-known tasks in adapting poetic language from one language into another. These problems are increased enormously in the case of Chinese, which is a language with very few features in common with its European counterparts, and which has a poetical tradition extremely different from any found in Europe. Translation of poems from Chinese into English, and from English into Chinese, is one of the most ambitious efforts that a talented linguist can attempt; it requires much reading and study even before this work can really commence.

Understanding poems is always difficult; and when the poems present hard problems even for native speakers, then for foreign readers the tasks of even a general overall understanding may be severe, not to mention fully comprehending the fine detail of special features. These problems are the regular challenge for the translator of poetry. I have made translations myself, of foreign poems into English and also from English (of poems not written by me) into other languages, and so I have some personal experience of this challenge. One of the benefits of attempting to make translations, and of assisting others who are translating your own work into a foreign language, is that it is possible to learn more about your own writing as it is viewed from the outside, by someone who is trying to transport your writing from the outside into the inside of another language. Another benefit is that the space between one language and another is a domain of extraordinary interest, bringing into view some of the universals of human speech and highlighting the patterns of one culture as reflected in another. The act of translation itself can bring a person into this intermediate domain for a short while, neither quite in one language nor in the one on the other side. Often it is not so much word-meanings which display this interval, as the foreign grammar and structure in one system which has no direct parallel in the native grammar of the translator's own language. Sometimes this shadow-speech between one language and another seems like the very substance from which poems are made.

One really interesting problem area has to do with individual word-meaning. Linguists are familiar with the concepts of discourse-meaning and word-meaning. The first (discourse-meaning) concerns the structure of continuous extended meaning within a connected text consisting of phrases, sentences and paragraphs, and in case of poems, also of verse lines, stanzas, and complete poems. The second (word-meaning) concerns the lexical array of meanings and functions which a separate word can have, depending on its context and usage and its register, as well as sometimes its historical period. There are special reasons why, in certain kinds of poem, word-meaning presents unusual difficulties. This is because of problems relating to

discourse-context and collocation. In normal prose writing, the context within a sentence of an individual word, and the general context of the writing as a whole (its subject-field, or the kind of world which it describes or inhabits), usually make it possible to select from the array of lexical alternatives the particular meaning and function which fit in and make sense. Sometimes there is genuine ambiguity in the original text, and sometimes this is an intended effect; but often a careful consideration of context will enable the appropriate sense and function to be selected, and the overall pattern of discourse-meaning to be built up, step by step.

In poems which are perceived as difficult to understand clearly and fully, often this help from the study of context does not work so well. Individual words are placed in close relation in a new way, so that it is not easy to guess how the meaning of one relates to the meaning of the other. Sometimes a whole string of words seems to be making uncertain or doubtful connections, so that when the reader or translator consults a full, inclusive dictionary the different meanings for each word all seem at least partly possible, because the guidelines of sense and idiom seem to point in so many different directions at once. Sometimes even the grammatical function may not be fully clear, as when a word could be acting as a noun, or an adjective, or a verb, with no clear sign to show which is the actual case. The tenses of the verbs may shift and not follow any normal time sequence or logic of grammar. Pronouns also may shift, not seeming to refer clearly to distinct persons or things. Here the grammar of Chinese should be well-adjusted to find equivalents for these indeterminate features, that can make several different possible links at the same time. Indeed, each language has its own distinctive character: sentences in German are constructed in a different grammatical order from English; the musical sounds of Italian words are very different from their English counterparts; words for colours in French have a different quality or 'feel' from words that name the similar colours in English, so that *rouge* is not *red*, and *vert* is not *green*.

Such features make the building-up of a clear discourse-meaning in poems hard to achieve: there are so many choices to be made and too little indication of which choice is the right one. Sometimes a foreign text will contain allusions or half-quotations which a native-speaker might recognise, and these may provide some guidance, but the foreign translator may not have enough cultural background to be assisted by such features. In my own case, none of my poems are expressions of the personality of the writer or part of any biographical history; sometimes they contain several different voices, and sometimes no specific voice at all, or any person who is assumed to be speaking. For this reason, maybe it is especially important not just to translate line by line or stanza by stanza, but to grasp the complete poem as a whole, and then to trace the effects of each stage within the overall development. Also, within groups of poems it is likely that certain shared features will be recognisable, so that reading one poem may assist in the full reading of another.

These indirect methods of interpretation may also assist with a further kind of trouble in understanding, which is likely to arise if the reader asks, what is this poem about, what is its subject or theme. Many poems, in English and also in Chinese, do not have a subject in the manner that, for

example, an essay will have a subject as indicated by its title. Many poems of mine, especially more recent ones, are composed in a somewhat abstract way, without direct description or telling any sort of story, using words of many separate and different kinds. These difficulties in the fine detail of poetic language come from the creative newness of what is distinctive to poetry itself, that it is not following familiar and normal pathways but making new tracks of expression and combination, requiring the reader to find the patterns of imagination and to use imagination to work them out: what has sometimes been called 'inspired guesswork'. But many of these poems will have some mode of argument or progression, even so; this feature has changed as time has passed between the period of my earlier poems and later ones, and in a similar way the mode of translation may need to recognise and give expression to these developments.

The word *argument* might help to provide some useful guidance for a translator of poems that are dense in structure and do not have an obvious descriptive or narrative character. Here are two definitions of the word:

1. *Argument*: a connected series of statements intended to establish or explore or communicate an opinion or point of view or principle; a linked process of reasoning, often tending by stages towards a conclusion;
2. *Argument*: the summary of the subject-matter of a book or part of a book; a synopsis, especially of the sequence of sections or stages of development in a text; the nature or structure of such development.

These definitions are not exclusive, since for example the word argument can also refer to a dispute or controversy between individuals holding opposing views; but the two definitions above perhaps do suggest that certain kinds of poems may be considered in some ways as arguments, although not only logical or intellectual in form, since imagination and poetical intelligence will also be involved as sources of energy and direction. But the term argument may suggest that poems can contain and perform energy, and can involve the reader in energy of thought and response. This means that the translator will need to recognise energies of this kind in the foreign text and find ways to transmit such energies into the results of translation. And the links within the poem to be translated may not be recognisable as logical or traditional in forms of usual syntax, since they may involve kinds of experiment with thought and with words. The translator may have to take some adventurous risks, since there is no reliable way to be correct.

Other problems for the reader and translator come from the formal aspects of poetic composition. The patterns of sound and rhythm produce effects which cannot easily be described in their relation to discourse-meaning; these patterns evidently affect sense and understanding but it is often not easy to comprehend in what ways this is so. Sometimes a foreign reader will be able to notice many effects of words or parts of words which have a similarity of sound or form to other words, sometimes making sequences of connection that have links with other related pattern-sequences; and it is not easy to work out what significance these features may contribute, what effects they may produce. The shape of the line-endings and the stanza-form, or the internal breaks that separate one part of a poem from the next,

likewise create shapes which are another kind of pattern, and again it is often hard to see how these contribute to meaning. Sometimes a literary critic may have studied these texts and may have written some guidance about interpretation, which will provide help for the reader or translator. But if the poetic texts are modern, or contemporary and of the present age, then it is likely that there will be little published criticism or commentary concerning such works; and often remarks by critics are very general and uninformative.

Maybe this is where the translator can obtain some help from the writer of the original texts. Maybe many ambiguities can be cleared up by simply asking the writer, which possible meaning is the right one? If the writer gives a clear answer, maybe this means that at least some difficulties are at an end? Then the reader can benefit from consulting a translation which is declared to have been made with the active assistance of the writer, and which can be trusted not to make mistakes. Maybe if the translator is uncertain about the overall discourse-meaning, or about the effects of rhythms and patterns, the writer can give explanations here too which will clarify these uncertainties, and give the translator confidence in choosing the best way forward. I do not know about other writers, but in my own case this is not the kind of help that I am able to give, and I shall try to explain why this is so.

First, it should be said that if the work of translation is necessary and important and truly noble, then a writer should give as much help as possible, either by exchange of questions and answers or by general discussion, preferably face to face. At least, that is my own view. But some kinds of help which may seem practical and possible may in fact be impossible to provide; and the best kinds of help may have to be indirect, leaving much to the translator's own judgement. There are two main reasons for this. One reason is that the writer may be in no position to resolve such difficulties, partly because of seeing the text from the inside and not from the outside, and partly because these difficulties will have close relation to the translator's own native-language tasks, which the writer will not be able to apprehend. Another reason is that the translator's solutions to problems need to be part of an overall creative coherence of design and presentation, without interference from anyone and anywhere else.

In this case, what kind of practical help is it really possible for a writer to give to a translator? For myself I have often found that one specific kind of guidance or suggestion that can be offered concerns the translation task itself. The general suggestion goes like this. If after study the text still presents difficulties, consider what these difficulties are. Suppose that many of them are like the ones I have described above, all concerned with arriving at a clear understanding of meaning before the translation work can commence. The features that make meaning (both word-meanings and discourse-meaning) hard to determine all seem like obstacles to the translation task, to be surmounted by choices which leave the way forward more or less clear. Now, reconsider this whole way of encountering this question of difficulty, of ambiguity and uncertainty in the forms of poetic composition. Maybe these features are not difficulties in the path towards finding out the poem's true character, maybe they really *are* the poem's character, its inward method: maybe the poem is in the words and their patterns as much as in their

meaning. To be very daring we could go further: maybe the poem's character or even its mood and activity have a relation with questions of meaning only through the words, and their difficulties, and hardly at all with meaning as a separate problem. Maybe the translator should put the question of a fixed clear meaning to one side, and concentrate on the words.

This point of view would alter the translator's task. The problems in the text would become the features of the text, its method of working. The challenge to the translator would be to identify the problem-features and then to find ways to produce similar matching features in the translation. If the word-meaning in the original text has many ambiguities, then so should the word-meaning in the translation. If an idiom seems to be broken or disordered in some way, or joined with another expression which seems to have no obvious connection, there may be no urgent need to work out what this means; instead, it may be possible to select a similar idiom and then break or join it in a similar kind of way, reproducing the effect of the original as much as the meaning; indeed such features may not have any direct 'meaning' in a conventional sense. The relation of sentence grammar to the position of line endings may be another feature of verse form that is controlled so as to produce certain intended effects; here the translator may not be able to reproduce these effects directly, but may succeed in finding some equivalent within the possibilities of the grammatical structure and poetic tradition of his or her own language. Thus it could be that there is no good reason to try to settle problems by making doubtful choices, when the doubt and the problem may be active features of the original and thus may be the form that needs to be carried across into the translation, as tasks for the reader.

It may even be possible for a skillful and effective translation to be produced by a translator who has not worked out a full meaning for the original text, and who has not made decisions about the selection of specific word-meanings. This method of translation would not be appropriate for prose texts with a more normal relation to discourse-meaning; but for poems and especially for 'difficult' poems it might be quite a good way to make new kinds of experiment. Also, the reader of this kind of translation may have more interesting work to do, because there would be the question here too for the reader whether to make choices so as to find a clear meaning, or to read through the form of the words so as to discover the poem's character and activity, and only then to consider the question of meaning. Reading a translation according to this method, even if less easy to do, could be more like the experience of reading the poem itself. It is not necessary for a translation to try to operate like some kind of explanation, if the original poem itself does not work by such means.

The writer can maybe help with this new kind of translation work in new and different ways. Sometimes these 'difficult' features themselves form patterns, for example by repetition and variation throughout the extent of a poetic text. Sometimes some individual word-meanings which belong in one kind of sense-area or topic focus can cross over, by ambiguity or resemblance of sound, into other sense-areas, producing novel hybrids of reference and 'meaning'. Sometimes there are different word sequences which make parallel or related rhythmic patterns, or developments of rhythm: sometimes what

does not easily make sense is where the sense actually lies. If a writer sees the text-process in this kind of way, this could be the basis for exchange of views and ideas between the writer and the translator that does not involve trying to 'answer' specific questions. Indeed, perhaps the best help that a writer can give may be to give not more information but less, at least in the matter of making choices about meaning.

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