

Notes on epistemology and translation

Luis Juan Solis

Universidad Autónoma Estado de México

An extensive of the paper presented at the Second International Translation and Interpretation Congress: From Babel to the XXI century (UABC)

April 20-22, 2006

BA in interpretation, ISIT; Master in Humanities, Universidad Anáhuac. Currently in the sixth semester of a doctorate in Humanities at UAEM (Research about language and the sensation in Ramón López Velarde and Fernando Pessoa). Literature and translation articles: Sintagma and La Colmena, UAEM publications; Espéculo, literary review from Universidad Complutense, Madrid. Professor at Faculty of Languages, UAEM.

Abstract

The following work deals with an analysis of the limitations of knowledge in the investigation of translation. It deals on issues such as the vastness of significance before the significant, the utopia of the androgynous discourse, the total construction, and the pertaining difficulties of stating investigative questions.

Notes on epistemology and translation

“There is no translation”, says the spirit that negates everything. They say translation does not exist because it is an activity whose bases are rooted in simple empiricism, because it has not been capable of generating rules or “universal principles” that can be applied to the enormous diversity of languages and cultures, it is not the object of quantitative research because translation, as a process, cannot be observed, because its bases will be forever enshrouded in a halo of mystery. For these, and many other reasons, translation “does not exist”. Or at least, it does not exist as a “true” science.

Nevertheless, translation has existed throughout the centuries. In a broad sense, we translate every second of our lives. Octavio Paz¹ says that when a

¹ *Theories of Translation, an Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. John Biguenet & Rainer Schulte (Editors). The University of Chicago Press. Chicago, 1992.

child asks his parents the meaning of a word, he is indeed translating it to his own universe, a universe that, for whatever reasons, is always a linguistic universe. In the classic example of Jakobson (1987, p.428), we can understand the meaning of the word *cheese* in English, even though we have never eaten a piece of Oaxaca, as long as we are familiar with other concepts as *food* or *milk*. In this way, we “translate” into our own linguistic and cultural world, words that can belong to other times and geographically remote places. According to Steiner (2001, p. 13) the first of the two possibilities that translation can adopt, is that of a hermeneutic functional model that includes all the significant exchanges of communication; we would *always* be translating. In agreement with this scheme, whoever reads these words will also be translating. It would probably be a translation from a language to the same language, but also between different perspectives and vital horizons. In a narrower view, one closely related to what we understand by the word translation, we can actually see the *product* of this old task, which will suffice to quiet the fools’ voice— I am grateful for the Spanish translation of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, I admire the translator, into Spanish, of my favorite novel, *La isla del día antes*². These products, of irreproachable quality, make me corroborate my suspicion that translation is not only possible, but that it in fact exists.

But the opposite is still being said...among other things, I have heard discussions on what I would call the “hidden face of translation”, that is to say, what happens in the **precise moment** that the shift occurs. Time, we are told by Aristotle, is the measure of change. Translation is movement, change. In a time

² *L'isola del giorno prima*, Umberto Eco (1994). [Editors note].

frame, it is possible to approach the translation of a text from any of the two temporal extremes; it is possible to look **before** or **after** a translating process. Nevertheless, despite relevant progress made in this field, we do not know, we cannot demonstrate, nor establish “laws” or universal “principles” of what **happens** during the act of translation. All translation process, as we can humanly analyze it, can usually be seen from point A (text to be translated) or from point B (translated text). It would obviously be a mistake to partake with one or the other element of this bitextual relation; by only looking at A, or at B. This is a mistake that unfortunately occurs more often than expected. Translation implies duality. This double aspect can be observed in the case of the child who translates in a monolingual plane, like in Paz’s example. Even there, there is a translation between two different worlds of knowledge, in existential and in the linguistic terms.

On the other hand, it is still possible to ask: What can we do with a text to be translated. Many things, I think : subject it to various readings, analyze it, interpret it, fragment it to its “minimum components”; rewrite it synthetically, memorize it, and above all trust it; believe that it has something to say to us. This act of faith, this principle of charity, is based in a *sine qua non* condition that there is a universe of sense behind what is said. Once this is done, we can continue to what we commonly know as the first phase of all translating process: the reading. I am talking about a reading that aspires to be more than a synchronic anchorage of the text. I am referring to a reading that embarks upon a more hermeneutic approach; that will not assume that what is written is all there

is to it; that all the text means can be found in morph-syntactic analysis. After this first phase, we can begin, or at least plan, the move to another language. Nevertheless, as soon as we go past this stage, when we modify (an unavoidable fact in the vast majority of the cases that are worth our while), when we manipulate “non important” constitutive factors, as are the elimination or substitution of periods and commas, the adequacy of prepositions and verbal tenses, when we do this, even if regards only one minimal component of the text, we are on the other side; we have left A to enter B, the domains of a new identity, totally different from the original. We are in a posterior instant; we are in the “after” of the act of translating.

The above is subject to criticism and objection. Some believe in the possibility of observing all that goes on at the moment of subjecting a text to the series of changes that a translation process implies. They think that it is possible to apply an arcane theory to the translation of a universe of texts, written in different time frames, by different authors that belong to very different literary backgrounds, and what is more, that these theories can establish predictions as though we were carrying out a laboratory experiment. If this was so, we could be in a condition to speak legitimately of a theory, as a theory is in good measure what its etymology seems to suggest, a sort of gaze at the future. From this perspective, some think that direct observation of what happens during the translation process is nothing but a record of sorts, perhaps a very detailed one, sorts, where you register every one of the steps that take you from A to B.

A terrible mistake. Once you touch text A, even to make a simple draft, we are in the presence of B. You never return to the starting point. It seems to me that in translation you are never in a middle zone. The move from A to B, can be described as an ontological instant, where a lot more than a mere change of language is going on. Indeed, a substantial change has taken place. In this way we can say that all such records are but an analysis, *a posteriori*, of what goes on in an individual's head during the act of translating.

The analysis of the different steps that takes us to obtain a certain text B does not constitute "the middle zone" of translation. There is nothing that establishes casualty relations between one phase and the other. Nothing is determined.

There is nothing forcing us, for example to translate this fragment of this famous Dante's sonnet *La vida nueva* this way:

*Tanto gentile e tanto honesta pare
La donna mia queand"ella altrui saluta
Cho'gne lengua deven tremando muta,
E li occhi no l'ardiscon di guardare*

*So noble and honest seems to me
My owner, that gentle salutes
That all tongues shiver and keep quiet
And no one dares to see her.*

Or this way

*Por ser tan efectiva y seriecita
Cuando dice: "¡Qué onda!" mi chamaca
A la gente se le cierra la buchaca
Y nadie me le grita "¡mamacita!"*

Comment: Yo esto no lo puedo traducir, el autor esta connotando un juego que prefiero que el dictamine

It is important to remember that every translator works in unique circumstances, a historical, social and commercial context that can not be reproduced. This constitutes what Eco calls "translation horizons". On the other hand, one of the great proprieties of language is its combinatory character. In this way, there is nothing that forces a certain final outcome of the process. There is no causal explanation that determines that one has to arrive at a certain version of a text. It could be argued that as we abandon space A, we enter a succession of phases B, which constitute "the middle point" between A and B, a sort of "during", an unfinished phase in the process of translation, something like: B1, B2, B3, etc. But if we have followed this rambling attentively, we can see that there is no "during". We can not see the "point" of transition between one extreme and the other. This movement happens in some illuminated, or better said, dark place in the mind of the one who translates. From this viewpoint, the analysis of B (in whichever of its supposedly middle forms) is always an exercise of something that has already been done, not in the process of execution. All translation is then a continuous process. B does not constitute a definite arrival point. We can not talk about intermediate phases, because what would they be intermediate of? As we can see, the process of translation is characterized by enormous indetermination. Rigorously, every single B is but one more state in a long, infinite series of B elements.

On the other hand, we think of final translation because we attribute to the text, at least to the printed word, an authority status that cancels the latin premise *verba volant*. The written word constitutes, for many, a lapidary structure,

unmovable and everlasting. Maybe it is, and this would prove the classics right. But returning to the series of possible versions, we know we have to cut the sequence of B somewhere.

B represents an entity with Protean properties. With the first change of a sentence, or a word, you start a chain of B's. Trying to elaborate an analysis of the "middle processes", with the purpose of generating principles and general laws, is equal to searching for the Holy Grail. To observe what happens when you translate, it would be necessary to travel to the neuronal bends, to all the cracks in the brains' net, into the chemistry that causes our reactions.

From a perspective based on casualty, we could ask ourselves about the issues, conditions and causes that would make a translator translate an A text in this or that way. What would a savvy translator say to us about moving *Don Quijote* into English? He would say, if anything at all, that the causes that made a certain translator produce some version of *Don Quijote* had been "determined" **exclusively** for that specific act of translation. Nothing after that. It would be in the best case scenario, an exacerbated form of optimism ; in the worst, an attempt to give everything a "letter of scientific legitimacy".

For many it is enough to apply the principles of hard science adequately, no matter to what branch of human knowledge (ie to translation) for it to obtain, now or someday, a scientific status. The latter is something that has been damaging science itself for a long time. In *Las raices del romanticismo*, Isaiah Berlin talks about the trust that Western tradition has conveyed upon three principles: "the first one, that all genuine questions can be answered and that if

not answered, they are not really a question. It is possible we might not know the answer, but somebody will“(2000, p.43).

In the case of translation, it would suffice to ask: What is the middle phase of the process of translation that enables that text A can convert into text B ? It seems that it is a well stated question, so an answer could be expected. We could also state some other questions : What are the “scientific” principles that can stem from our analysis? What measuring instruments enabled us to get to the principles? What can we predict in similar translation processes? Questions that would come to fruition in as many answers.

We know that all discourse, the scientific being one of them, always occurs from the perspective of tradition. All that can be said or asked, is determined, among other elements, by the laws of the trade, by the current scientific model, by the political apparatus in power, etc. Alas, we are always a bit late for that. Our questions and our words are trapped in the nets of what can be said and thought. In *El orden del discurso* (1973, p.30), Foucault says: “A proposition must comply with complex and grave demands in order to belong to of a discipline; before you can call it true or false it must be, as Canguilhem would say, in the “truth”.

In this way, we see that not all questions are legitimate. We can only question from the discipline standpoint, from its own rules. Nevertheless, you can stay on the fringe. A lot of the great discoveries arise from the fringes, out of the official discourse; their findings might be true, but not be *in* the truth. We know that Copernicus was right, but the World was in no condition to listen. Being *in*

the truth means doing science from science's own perspective . So in the intense debate about the separation of science and metaphysics a multitude of criteria of determination and separation of knowledge have been used: from the study of the principles with a genuine scientific character, to distinguish them from the ones that only have meaning in very different horizons from science (Carnap), to the delimitation of what can be asked from the perspective of verification, or from the possibility of negating what is said (Popper). As for the latter, we could come close to the debate about the "intermediate phase" in translation, asking ourselves if there is a thorough possibility of subjecting the findings to the paradoxical torture of proving its falseness. We could ask ourselves if it is possible to determine if there is empirical feasibility for experiments that instead of attempting to demonstrate the "truth" of the principles, undermine their very roots. Such things as metaphysics, or what goes on in the mind of a translator, do not leave this road open. On the second principle, Berlin says:

All of these answers are cognitive and can be discovered by means that can be learned and taught to others; there are techniques that can help learn and teach the ways of discovering the world, the place we hold in it, what is our connection with other men, with things, what are the real values, and the answer to any other serious question, by this I mean, all questions that have an answer. (2000, p.43).

The preceding only corroborates the relevance of the question. Lets us review Berlins' third proposition: "All the answers must be compatible among themselves, otherwise chaos will ensue" (2000, p.43). And we all know what a nuisance chaos is. Especially when wet try to establish principles of universal application that can take us to determine for example, the grounds of an intermediate point of translation.

In this way, translation and its processes will have to be compatible with the advances in fields as neurology, and with the findings and contributions of all the language sciences. It is a matter of order, of harmony.

The problem is that there is no harmony. There is a human tendency to eliminate uncertainties. We try to adjust the world to our own mental schemes. Far from dusting off the foundations of discipline, they try by every possible means to stay alive and to keep giving account of their parcel of reality. Marxist or feminists will find that their models perfectly explain such dissimilar phenomena as literature, sports or cooking. We believe in the forcefulness of mathematics. The use of formulas and equations are a fortunate unappealable endorsement of the rational. But all statistical graphics are in essence, a form of generalization, another interpretation of the world, a way to order where there is no order.

We believe in our intellect, in its benefits and symbols. Dictionaries are inmarcesible monuments to the "real" meaning of words; the coat of a doctor confers to any commercial for a weight loss product a sudden character of scientific rigour; the atom represents the ultimate fragmentation of reality. With this spirit, there is an attempt to give a firm scientific character to translation. We diligently look for the minimal units of translation, its cells. So, by dividing a text in its structural components, we are in a possibility to quantify. In this way, a quantifiable translation would be more "scientific". Mary Midgely says:

The reductive, atomist picture of explanation, which suggests that the right way to understand complex wholes is always to break them down into their smallest parts, leads us to think that truth always is always revealed at the end of that other invention of the seventeenth-century, the microscope. (2003, p.1).

Comment: Aquí valdria la pena la cita original del ingles

The units of translation allows us, so they say, to corroborate that there are no strange elements or losses in the move from A to B. We would only need to carry out a meticulous process of segmentation of the text to determine its minimum components. Obviously, the dividing criteria is always at the discretion of the dividing party. Vázquez-Ayora believes in the goodness of segmenting in lexical units, which would become a fundamental tool to prove the fidelity of the translation. In accordance with the above, the division would allow us to do two things: to prove correspondence between the texts, and the most scientific of all; proceed quantitatively, that is, to enumerate.

If to the segmentation resource of texts of both languages we add the enumeration of the obtained elements, we have an apt procedure to “verify the correspondences” [...] In other words, with segmentation it is proven that all elements of original enunciate meaning will reemerge in the translation. (1977, p. 17).

We only need to remember that a text, every kind of text, even the most literal, if such a thing exists, is more than the sum of its parts. A text is the son of his history and its literary tradition. I think segmentation can have some use. At least it allows us to have an element of control or a viewer of contents of the formal aspects of the text; segmentation becomes useful and commendable as a control tool in the translation classroom, as an analysis and comprehension instrument of the elements that come into play in the composition of a text, its

reciprocities and its connections. Nevertheless, it is dangerous to think that by dividing and quantifying we can establish correspondence relations between the two texts. It is a big mistake to see **one** , where there is always **two**. There is an essential distance between A and B. This difference is what enables us to talk about a departure text and an arrival text. All relationship of exact correspondence, voids, logic and essentially, the possibility of B's existence. But it exists, and what is more important, there is an unsalvable distance in the own constitution of the linguistic symbol.

We have the significant, the acoustic image, the graph if you may. But we also have the vastness of meaning. We would like to overcome the distance between the two parts, banish forever the hyphen that separates (more than unifies) the parts of the sign; we would like that one and the other could conform a whole, perfectly adequate in which one would thoroughly contain the other, without spaces between them.³ But as Borges said: *Siempre se pierde lo esencial es una ley de toda palabra sobre el numen*. This impossibility is what makes poets, as my dear and unappreciated, Ramon Lopez Velarde, dream about a full translation, where there would be no void between what is said and what is signified. Whether we like or not, there is always an abyss between the two. In the same way, the mirage of fragmentation will lead us to believe in the that it is perfectly possible to say here what was said there. Translation is a relationship of two, but these two are insurmountable one from the other. Again

³ Marlene Barsoun points out that the utopical fusion between significant and signifier, that can only be obtained in silence

with Borges, we can say that each language is a way to see the world, then we cannot talk about verifying “correspondences” The only thing that we can know, when we compare, is what we have always known: that there are many ones. Every literary work, every man can only express authentically in their mother tongue. In their own diversity, each one is unrepeatable, unique. This was known by people like Herder, Hamann or Schleiermacher. All translation is compromise. To translate is to exercise a will that does not want to be subdued or the reduction of another. In this sense, the words of George Steiner are superb: "an expert translator can be defined as the perfect host:⁴ (1989,p.146) I want to understand these words in the following way : A good host lets us be who we are, he talks and he hears us. The bad host overthrows, or even distorts, the essence of the guest:

Comment: Aquí valdria la pena la cita original

The great translators - very rare unfortunately - act like a human mirror. They offer to the original not an equivalency, because this does not exist, but a vital counterpoise, an echo, faithful but autonomous like we find in the dialogue of human love. An act of translation is an act of love. When it fails, for lack of decency or because of a blurred perception, it only translates. When it triumphs, it embodies.⁵ (Steiner, 1998,p.270)

Comment: Ditto

I have said that translation can only be seen in a binary relationship. All attempts to concentrate the effort in one of the two elements of the relationship leaves its complementary opposite on the side. Reading with or without the intention of a translation process is a transforming experience. We never bathe two times in the same river, and we never read the same text two times. With

⁴ Aquí valdria la pena la cita original

⁵ Ditto

each new reading, we situate ourselves, and the text, on a different horizon; this creates new relationships; it establishes distances and similarities; breaks equilibrium and places us in otherness. Part of the problem is the erroneous belief that there is a starting point. There are starting points.

A text is a generating surface of meanings, semantically overloaded and unstable. A text does not say it all. It is necessary to collaborate with it, to participate in the creation of meanings. In this way we distance ourselves from the rigid and the inert to enter a relationship with a flexible and alive entity, subject to a context of what is said and can be thought, where we accomplish the reading. The reader of *Pierre Menard autor del Quixote*⁶ can understand this. As naive readers, we think that there is a text from where we start, that the reasoned and methodical effort will lead us to obtain an exact text in the other language.

The uncertainty is double because the text does not consist of entities that eternally repeat the same, nor are we unmovable entities in time, we are not essences. Translation is situated then, in an indeterminate plane that goes from A to B, where the fixed identity of A and B are questioned. With all of this, we can say that translation is not a science. It is not in a rigorist sense of the term. It is not because, in more than one sense, translation is an esthetic activity, a literary labor, a way of showing our individuality, and the corresponding poetic discourse. If we look at it this way, we see that there is a distance created between translation and its forms and the discourse with scientific aspirations.

⁶ From Jorge Luis Borges (*Ficciones*, 1944). [Editors' note]

If translation as a discourse does not have an absolute application in geography and time, then it cannot be scientifically observed. It can not be measured nor predicted which is a vast zone of the act of translating. That zone is always at the other side of the gaze, on the other side of the own words. It can not be subdued to Poppers' rigors. Translation could only be considered as a science in a very broad and lax sense. The extent or vagueness of the concept is what gives way to questions difficult to answer, where the own epistemological conception of the phenomenon is at stake: Is it a science or an art? I bet on the second. Are translators made or born? It had better to lean to the idea that they are made. Is it possible to teach to translate? It is possible, as it is possible to teach someone to play the piano, but in an ideal world there has to be a maximum of interest and at least some talent. Nevertheless I am not capable of answering questions such as: How do you translate? Or worse, what goes on in the mind of a translator? I do not have the answer to any of these questions, or for that matter, to many others. To place oneself in the hardened position that sees translation as a science or as something indefinite that aspires to be something like it, is limiting to the trade and limiting to the practitioner. Maybe it is an "exact art", as the old formula goes, a true and exact art in accordance with its own basis and principles. Translation nevertheless can nourish from different sciences and can also be studied "scientifically" if so desired. It has a lot of creative labor, a bit of habit and a bit of intuition. That it lacks "principles of universal application" and that a lot of its theoretic foundations are condemned to the impossibility of proof or refutation, does not prevent translation from *being*.

References

- BARSOUM, M. (2001). *Théophile Gautier's Mademoiselle de Maupin, Toward a Definition of the "Androgynous Discourse"*. Currents in Comparative Romance Languages and Literatures, Vol. 102. New York: Peter Lang.
- BERLIN, I. (2000). *Las raíces del Romanticismo* (S. Mari, Trad.). Madrid: Taurus.
- FOUCAULT, M. (1973). *El orden del discurso*. Barcelona: Tusquets.
- JAKOBSON, R. (1987). «On linguistic Aspects of Translation». In K. Pomorska & S. Rudy (Eds.), *Language in Literature*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- MIDGLEY, M. (2003). *The Myths We Live by*. London: Routledge.
- PAZ, O. (1992). "Translation Literature and Letters". In J. Biguenet & R. Schulte (Eds.), *Theories of Translation, an Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (pp. 152-162). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- RICŒUR, P. (2003). *El conflicto de las interpretaciones. Ensayos de hermenéutica*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- STEINER, G. (1989). *Real Presences*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- STEINER, G. (1998). *Language and Silence*. USA: Yale University Press.
- STEINER, G. (2001). *Después de Babel. Aspectos del lenguaje y la traducción*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- VÁZQUEZ-AYORA, G. (1977). *Introducción a la traductología*. Washington: Georgetown University Press.