

Difficile est transferre hanc sententiam Latinam in Anglicam: The Depth and Charm
of Latin Translation

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In 1950 British mathematician Alan Turing proposed a simple test to determine whether or not computers can think. Imagine you are seated at a computer that is connected to a computer in another room. Using the keyboard you enter various expressions and questions, and a person in the other room responds using the other computer and keyboard. Now consider what would happen if the other person exited the room, but a computer program were left to run in such a way that it continued the communication with you. Turing's proposal was this: If you were unable to tell when the other person left and the computer program began to run, you would have to conclude that the computer could think. In other words, if the computer could fool you into believing you were communicating with a human being, we would have proof of a computer's ability to think.

Thirty years later philosopher John Searle attempted to undermine the Turing Test with his famous Chinese room experiment. Imagine you are locked in a room with a huge book of rules explaining in English how to respond in Chinese to a variety of Chinese sentences. Now suppose a native Chinese speaker slides slips of paper under your door containing sentences in Chinese. You look up the characters in your rule book, compose an answer in exact accordance to the rules, and slide your response back under the door. Unbeknownst to you, the sentences you received were actually questions, and the responses you wrote down, thanks to your rulebook but utterly unknown to you, were perfectly articulate responses. The person outside your room would

surely conclude that she was communicating with someone who understood Chinese. But would she be correct?

This question, in different forms, goes back at least as far as Plato's *Theaetetus* and continues today in the foreign language classroom. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates explores the question of whether perception is the same as knowledge, by bringing forth the example of foreign languages, of which a person may see the letters and hear the sounds, but nothing more. Theaetetus replies, "We shall say, Socrates, that we know just so much of them as we do see and hear. The shape and color of the letters we both see and know; we hear and at the same time know the rising and falling accents of the voice. But we neither perceive by sight and hearing nor yet know what a schoolmaster or an interpreter could tell us about them."¹

But what is it exactly that a schoolmaster is able to tell students about a language? Do we not traditionally, if not altogether typically these days, instruct students that this or that suffix indicates a particular tense and voice, and this or that prefix when combined with certain stems produces certain orthographic changes? At the end of the day in a traditional, grammar-based language classroom, students have acquired a more or less complete rule book, not unlike the one supplied to the non-Chinese speaker in Searle's thought experiment. Like Searle's translator, the foreign language student is then able, at least in theory, to produce meaningful sentences in the target language, or in the native language in response to ones from the target language. Yet there remains the

unsettling sensation, often in the minds of both teachers and students, that like the thought experiment translator, the students really do not understand with all the fullness they might, and that they have perhaps not moved so far past Theaetetus' first knowledge of language based on perception, despite the best efforts of the schoolmaster.

Some will respond that this is precisely why they have jettisoned traditional, grammar-based pedagogy, in which translation was the *summum bonum*, for a more inductive approach that sees reading as the highest aim. My challenge here is not so much to take issue with the inductive reading approach, but to suggest that translation as an intentional aim of the foreign language class is not the enemy that some perceive it. In fact, it is a useful and creative activity that taps into the very heart of what it means to be human, and thus should find a central place within the humanities.

To begin, complete translation is an impossible task. There you have it, in print, exactly what our students have been telling us from first year onward. If you do not believe this, try a simple exercise after about a week of first year Latin. Ask your students to translate a simple sentence such as, *Puella aquam portat*. The most common translation will be, "The girl carries water." But listen carefully to the chorus of responses. Did not some say, "Girl carries water," and still others, "A girl carries water?" This is the perfect time to introduce Latin's lack of articles and what meaning articles convey in English. Add to this a discussion of the distinct emphatic and progressive forms of the present tense in

English, and you can elicit twenty-seven distinct English translations. Some of these, such as “girl does carry a water,” can be dismissed as rarely, if ever, occurring in Standard English, but suddenly both teacher and students have entered another realm of mature language processing.

Now consider what students can explore about the nuances of Latin through this same simple sentence. *Puella* is a diminutive form of *puer*, an etymological and connotative element that is lost in the translation “girl.” Both the subject and the verb are in an emphatic position, a fact students will come to appreciate and, admittedly, see even more clearly in the longer sentences of authentic Roman literature. Attempting to accommodate all such connotations and nuances, together with the ambiguity supplied by the lack of articles and distinct emphatic and progressive forms, into one English sentence results in something like, “A girl, perhaps one in particular or one in general or even the concept of girl, but no matter what understood as a smaller or lesser boy and thus significant for her attention-getting placement in the sentence, though the attention may simply be to connect the lesser boy with the servile content of the sentence, is now in the process of carrying or in general transports, but at this moment or in general does nothing else with, water, whether that be aquatic fluid in general, a particular yet unidentified container of water, or the specific container of water that had taken the speaker’s attention.”

Of course no teacher would ever accept such a ridiculous rendering on a test, and several of the twenty-seven variations on the simple word-for-word

translation may sound absurd. By embracing the particularities and limitations of both languages, however, students begin to explore the potentialities of each.

In fact, the problem with translation as we typically teach or have taught it is that we are too limited in our limitations. We do not offer enough restraints, thus precluding any opportunity for our students to choose freely among them, and this is where the real art of translation comes in. If we offer students only a strict one-to-one correspondence, then *portamus* can only be translated “we carry,” and nothing else. When we introduce the variety of present tense forms, we are on our way to inviting true choice and creativity in translation, but what if we take this a step further? Suppose we consider translating only the sounds of the words. *Portamus* then becomes “Poor Thomas.” Extending this to actual literature, we find that Vergil’s first line of *Eclogue 1* (*Tityre, tu patulae . . .*) becomes something like, “Hip-hooray! You, Pat, you lie!” The opening of the *Aeneid* (*Arma virumque . . .*) comes out as, “Arm and we’re rum quake” Again, this would not be something any teacher would accept on a test, but consider what has been gained by attempting something so radically different. First, we have accomplished a genuine translation. Roman listeners who heard Vergil recite his poem would have had an aural experience with the sounds of the Latin words, and, assuming our modern conventions of pronunciation are similar to the sounds of Latin, we have reproduced a comparable aural experience using English words. Second, students must now discuss why, despite the legitimacy of this form of translation, it nevertheless seems pointless.

Whence derives the assumed value and superiority of the content translation as opposed to the sound translation?

OULIPO, an acronym for *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, or Workshop of Potential Literature, has been doing this for years. A quotation from Igor Stravinsky on one OULIPO website perhaps states best what they are all about. “The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees oneself of the chains that shackle the spirit... the arbitrariness of the constraint only serves to obtain precision of execution.”² For example, what if one were to impose on oneself the requirement of sound equivalence between the Latin original and the English translation? As strange as that may seem to someone used to working with content-only translations, it is precisely the model Celia and Louis Zukofsky employed in their translations of Catullus. Consider a few examples.

In their translation of Catullus 1, they render *perenne saeclo* as “perennial cycle,”³ which clearly picks up the sound of the Latin. The opening lines of Catullus 4, *Phasellus ille quem videtis, hospites,/ait fuisse navium celerrimus,*” become “Facile as can be the boat you see, my guests, says - / it was the fastest of a navy for its run.” Here the sound of *phasellus* is echoed in “facile,” and the long vowels and the internal rhyme in *phasellus* and *videtis* find expression in the rhyme “be/see.” The sounds of *navium* are divided and redistributed in “navy/run.” The final words of the opening line of Catullus 101, *per aequora vectus,* find expression in “by a core of wake tossed.” Although all of their attempts are not so delightfully successful, these examples show that the sense is

reasonably maintained along with the sound, and the constraint of phonic imitation has perhaps inspired word choices that would not otherwise have been considered. Without question their choice of words is precise.

It is this precision of execution that Stravinsky observed that most language teachers and students would claim as their goal, and perhaps nowhere does a person become more conscious of the arbitrariness of translational constraints than in dealing with self-referential sentences. In his book *Metamagical Themas*, Douglas Hofstadter takes a delightful and provocative look at these little linguistic headaches, and although one of his repeated examples involves a French sentence, I shall attempt to reconstruct what he was getting at with a Latin counterpart. How do you translate into English the sentence, *Difficile est transferre hanc sententiam Latinam in Anglicam?* If we translate, “It is difficult to translate this Latin sentence into English,” to what does the phrase “this Latin sentence” refer? As Hofstadter points out with his French example, if it is referring to the English sentence of which it is a part, then it is no longer referring to a Latin sentence at all, which makes the entire English sentence false, whereas the Latin original was true. If the phrase refers to the Latin original, then something rather more is being asked of the word “this” than seems appropriate. We have translated word-for-word, but have somehow missed entirely the sense of the Latin original.

Responding to Hofstadter’s French example, Yale computer scientist John Case offered this, *mutatis mutandis*. “It is difficult to translate the Latin sentence

Difficile est transferre hanc sententiam Latinam in Anglicam into English.” Again Hofstadter would point out that something is missing. Whereas both the Latin original and the English rendering point to the same sentence, the Latin points to itself, the English to points another. The Latin contains a certain tangledness, as Hofstadter would say, that the English lacks entirely.

Hofstadter himself would prefer an English analogue, in other words, an English sentence with a tangledness isomorphic to that of the original, perhaps something on the lines of “This English sentence is difficult to translate into Latin.” He points out, “That’s where the *essence* of the sentence lies, after all!”⁴ He goes on to recognize, however, that many will jump to question whether this is, in fact, translation.

So what has all this to do with the Latin classroom? Hofstadter writes, “The problem of self-referential sentences is just the tip of the iceberg, as far as translation is concerned. The understanding of such sentences involves a mixture of deriving the content and yet retaining the form in mind, letting qualities of the form conjure up flavors and enhance the meaning with a halo of not-quite-conscious pseudo-meanings, connotations, flavors, that flicker in the mind, not quite in reach, not quite out of reach. You can’t sweep the problems under the rug, though some would like to do so.”⁵

Taking this idea even further, Hofstadter explores issues of translation with regard to one poem in his book *Le Ton Beau de Marot (The Sweet Tone of Marot)*. The poem, “A une Damoyseille malade,” (“To an Ailing Maiden”) is a

brief piece of just twenty-eight lines composed by Clement Marot. Each line is likewise brief, containing three syllables, and joins its successor in rhyming couplets. Inviting friends and colleagues to try their hands at translation, Hofstadter includes, along with his own attempts, seventy-two different renderings in his book. Each one could be justified as an accurate translation, yet each addresses only certain aspects of the French original, leaving none to render sufficiently, or at least satisfactorily, into English.

If such a number of translations seems to exhaust the possible renderings for such a short poem, consider the number of renderings for Horace's ode to Pyrrha (*Odes* I.5). In his polyglot collection Ronald Storrs included only sixty-four of the one hundred eighty-one English translations he had collected, and of course more have come along since the publication of that volume in 1959.

All instructors know that their students employ published translations to guide them through their assignments, so why not take advantage of the multiplicity of translations readily available and explore the art of translation with the students? With its *Poets in Translation* series, Penguin has issued collections of English language renderings of Homer, Horace, Martial, Ovid, Seneca, and Vergil. Consider, for example, *Aeneid* VI.264-269 and a tiny sample of the variety of translations it has produced.

Di, quibus imperium est animarum, umbraeque silentes
et Chaos et Phlegethon, loca nocte tacentia late:
sit mihi fas audita loqui, sit numine vestro
pandere res alta terra et caligine mersas.

Yee gods of sowls in Darknes deep that dwell
Thow Phlegeton, and Chaos voyd of lyght
grawnt with your favors leave to mee to tell
things hard thowgh hid in deeps from mortall syght.

Sir John Harrington (1561-1612)⁶

You gods who souls command, and silent ghosts,
Phlegeton, Chaos, night's vast dismall coasts,
Grant I declare things heard, by your aid shew
What earth and darkness long hath hid below.

John Ogilby (1600-1676)⁷

Ye Realms, yet unreveal'd to human sight,
Ye Gods, who rule the Regions of the Night,
Ye gliding Ghosts, permit me to relate
The mystick Wonders of your silent State.

John Dryden (1631-1700)⁸

Ye Gods who rule over
The empire of spirits,
And ye, silent Shades,
Ye, Chaos and Phlegethon,
Regions of wide-brooding
Stillness and night,
Be the privilege allowed me
To tell what I've heard.

James Henry (1798-1876)⁹

As students explore these and other modern translations (the most recent translation of the *Aeneid* by Robert Fagles was just published in November, 2006), they begin to see that there is far more to the translator's art than merely identifying the tense and voice of a verb.

Now imagine the students themselves working out their own translations in the Latin classroom. Catullus 85, for example, is a poignant couplet comprised of short, punctuated thoughts and framed by the opening and closing words *odi*

and *excrucior*, two verbs of enormous emotional import. It is no particular challenge for students to understand its message, but to render this diminutive poem into English raises the stakes of creativity. Should the English version retain at least an accentual equivalent of the elegiac couplet? Is there any way to suggest how tightly connected are hatred and love, as the Latin suggests through elision? Does it matter whether *quare* in the first line is rendered “why”, or “for what reason?” What is gained, or lost, by rendering this one Latin word with one English, or with three?

Rather than merely ask students to translate Catullus or Vergil in the traditional sense of producing a prose rendering that is little more than what Searle’s Chinese-room translator could have done, rather than simply ask them to read and discuss the so-called meaning or theme of a given passage, teachers can invite students at any level of study to compete with the literary artists of antiquity by joining the great translators of every age in the enterprise of exploring the range and limitation of the original and creating anew a work in another language, complete with its own potential and limitation. By inviting students to engage and create in this way, teachers lead them past simple memorization and regurgitation into authentic creation, thus enabling and perhaps even inspiring them to take their place alongside the word-artists of the world.

By embracing challenges like self-referential sentences in the early stages of foreign language study, students can begin to grasp the range of possibilities

and potentialities in both their target and native languages as they explore and deal directly with the limitations and restraints of those languages. Ultimately their goal becomes one of not only understanding why the translations of Chapman, Pope, Lattimore, Fagles, Mandelbaum and the like are inherently flawed masterpieces, but of trying their own hand at the failed perfection of translation. As Hofstadter observed, “These are matters of subtle judgment, and they are where being human and flexible makes all the difference. Rigid rules about translation may lead you to a kind of mechanical consistency, but at the sacrifice of all depth and charm.”⁶ Perhaps, then, it is just this, the introduction to the depth and charm of literature, that Theaetetus’ schoolmaster provides as the necessary component for true knowledge of a language.

Author’s Note

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Endnotes

¹*Theaetetus* 163c

²<http://www.nous.org.uk/oulipo.html>

³Zukofsky. The Zukofskys do not use page numbers in their book, but the poem numbers do follow the standard ordering.

⁴Hofstadter 1989, 23.

⁵Hofstadter 1989, 24.

⁶Gransden, 44.

⁷Gransden, 73.

⁸Gransden, 149.

⁹Gransden, 196.

¹⁰Hofstadter 1989, 24.

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