What is language translation?

Translation is the communication of the meaning of a source–language text by means of an equivalent target-language text. The English language draws a terminological distinction (which does not exist in every language) between translating (a written text) and interpreting (oral or signed communication between users of different languages); under this distinction, translation can begin only after the appearance of writing within a language community.

A translator always risks inadvertently introducing source–language words, grammar, or syntax into the target–language rendering. On the other hand, such "spill-overs" have sometimes imported useful source–language calques and loanwords that have enriched target languages. Translators, including early translators of sacred texts, have helped shape the very languages into which they have translated.

Because of the laboriousness of the translation process, since the 1940s efforts have been made, with varying degrees of success, to automate translation or to mechanically aid the human translator. More recently, the rise of the Internet has fostered a world-wide market for translation services and has facilitated "language localization".

Etymology

The English word "translation" derives from the Latin word translatio,[6] which comes from trans, "across" + ferre, "to carry" or "to bring" (-latio in turn coming from latus, the past participle of ferre). Thus translatio is "a carrying across" or "a bringing across" – in this case, of a text from one language to another.

Some Slavic languages and the Germanic languages (other than Dutch and Afrikaans) have calqued their words for the concept of "translation" on translatio, substituting their respective Slavic or Germanic root words for the Latin roots. The remaining Slavic languages instead calqued their words for "translation" from an alternative Latin word, trāductiō, itself derived from trādūcō ("to lead across" or "to bring across")—from trans ("across") + dūcō, ("to lead" or "to bring").

The West and East Slavic languages (except for Russian) adopted the translātiō pattern, whereas Russian and the South Slavic languages adopted the trāductiō pattern. The Romance languages, deriving directly from Latin, did not need to calque their equivalent words for "translation"; instead, they simply adapted the second of the two alternative Latin words, trāductiō.

The Ancient Greek term for "translation", μετάφρασις (metaphrasis, "a speaking across"), has supplied English with "metaphrase" (a "literal", or "word-for-word", translation)—as contrasted with "paraphrase" ("a saying in other words", from παράφρασις, paraphrasis) "Metaphrase" corresponds, in one of the more recent terminologies, to "formal equivalence"; and "paraphrase", to "dynamic equivalence".

Strictly speaking, the concept of metaphrase—of "word-for-word translation"—is an imperfect concept, because a given word in a given language often carries more than one

meaning; and because a similar given meaning may often be represented in a given language by more than one word. Nevertheless, "metaphrase" and "paraphrase" may be useful as ideal concepts that mark the extremes in the spectrum of possible approaches to translation.

History

The first important translation in the West was that of the Septuagint, a collection of Jewish Scriptures translated into early Koine Greek in Alexandria between the 3rd and 1st centuries BCE. The dispersed Jews had forgotten their ancestral language and needed Greek versions (translations) of their Scriptures.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Latin was the lingua franca of the western learned world. The 9th-century Alfred the Great, king of Wessex in England, was far ahead of his time in commissioning vernacular Anglo-Saxon translations of Bede's Ecclesiastical History and Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy. Meanwhile, the Christian Church frowned on even partial adaptations of St. Jerome's Vulgate of c. 384 CE, the standard Latin Bible.

In Asia, the spread of Buddhism led to large-scale ongoing translation efforts spanning well over a thousand years. The Tangut Empire was especially efficient in such efforts; exploiting the then newly invented block printing, and with the full support of the government (contemporary sources describe the Emperor and his mother personally contributing to the translation effort, alongside sages of various nationalities), the Tanguts took mere decades to translate volumes that had taken the Chinese centuries to render.[citation needed]

The Arabs undertook large-scale efforts at translation. Having conquered the Greek world, they made Arabic versions of its philosophical and scientific works. During the Middle Ages, translations of some of these Arabic versions were made into Latin, chiefly at Córdoba in Spain. King Alfonso X the Wise of Castile in the 13th century promoted this effort by founding a Schola Traductorum (School of Translation) in Toledo. There Arabic texts, Hebrew texts, and Latin texts were translated into the other tongues by Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars, who also argued the merits of their respective religions. Latin translations of Greek and original Arab works of scholarship and science helped advance European Scholasticism, and thus European science and culture.

The broad historic trends in Western translation practice may be illustrated on the example of translation into the English language.

Geoffrey Chaucer

The first fine translations into English were made in the 14th century by Geoffrey Chaucer, who adapted from the Italian of Giovanni Boccaccio in his own Knight's Tale and Troilus and Criseyde; began a translation of the French-language Roman de la Rose; and completed a translation of Boethius from the Latin. Chaucer founded an English poetic tradition on adaptations and translations from those earlier-established literary languages.

The first great English translation was the Wycliffe Bible (c. 1382), which showed the weaknesses of an underdeveloped English prose. Only at the end of the 15th century did the great age of English prose translation begin with Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur—an adaptation of Arthurian romances so free that it can, in fact, hardly be called a true translation. The first great Tudor translations are, accordingly, the Tyndale New Testament (1525), which influenced the Authorized Version (1611), and Lord Berners' version of Jean Froissart's Chronicles (1523–25).

Marsilio Ficino

Meanwhile, in Renaissance Italy, a new period in the history of translation had opened in Florence with the arrival, at the court of Cosimo de' Medici, of the Byzantine scholar Georgius Gemistus Pletho shortly before the fall of Constantinople to the Turks (1453). A Latin translation of Plato's works was undertaken by Marsilio Ficino. This and Erasmus' Latin edition of the New Testament led to a new attitude to translation. For the first time, readers demanded rigor of rendering, as philosophical and religious beliefs depended on the exact words of Plato, Aristotle and Jesus.

Non-scholarly literature, however, continued to rely on adaptation. France's Pléiade, England's Tudor poets, and the Elizabethan translators adapted themes by Horace, Ovid, Petrarch and modern Latin writers, forming a new poetic style on those models. The English poets and translators sought to supply a new public, created by the rise of a middle class and the development of printing, with works such as the original authors would have written, had they been writing in England in that day.

The Elizabethan period of translation saw considerable progress beyond mere paraphrase toward an ideal of stylistic equivalence, but even to the end of this period, which actually reached to the middle of the 17th century, there was no concern for verbal accuracy.

In the second half of the 17th century, the poet John Dryden sought to make Virgil speak "in words such as he would probably have written if he were living and an Englishman". As great as Dryden's poem is, however, one is reading Dryden, and not experiencing the Roman poet's concision. Similarly, Homer arguably suffers from Alexander Pope's endeavor to reduce the Greek poet's "wild paradise" to order. Both works live on as worthy English epics, more than as a point of access to the Latin or Greek.

Edward FitzGerald

Throughout the 18th century, the watchword of translators was ease of reading. Whatever they did not understand in a text, or thought might bore readers, they omitted. They cheerfully assumed that their own style of expression was the best, and that texts should be made to conform to it in translation. For scholarship they cared no more than had their predecessors, and they did not shrink from making translations from translations in third languages, or from languages that they hardly knew, or—as in the case of James Macpherson's "translations" of Ossian—from texts that were actually of the "translator's" own composition.

Benjamin Jowett

The 19th century brought new standards of accuracy and style. In regard to accuracy, observes J.M. Cohen, the policy became "the text, the whole text, and nothing but the text", except for any bawdy passages and the addition of copious explanatory footnotes.[j] In regard to style, the Victorians' aim, achieved through far-reaching metaphrase (literality) or pseudo-metaphrase, was to constantly remind readers that they were reading a foreign classic. An exception was the outstanding translation in this period, Edward FitzGerald's Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam (1859), which achieved its Oriental flavor largely by using Persian names and discreet Biblical echoes and actually drew little of its material from the Persian original.

In advance of the 20th century, a new pattern was set in 1871 by Benjamin Jowett, who translated Plato into simple, straightforward language. Jowett's example was not followed, however, until well into the new century, when accuracy rather than style became the principal criterion.

Modern translation

As a language evolves, texts in an earlier version of the language—original texts, or old translations—may become difficult for modern readers to understand. Such a text may therefore be translated into more modern language, producing a "modern translation" (e.g., a "modern English translation" or "modernized translation").

Such modern rendering is applied either to literature from classical languages such as Latin or Greek, notably to the Bible (see "Modern English Bible translations"), or to literature from an earlier stage of the same language, as with the works of William Shakespeare (which are largely understandable by a modern audience, though with some difficulty) or with Geoffrey Chaucer's Middle-English Canterbury Tales (which is understandable to most modern readers only through heavy dependence on footnotes). In 2015 the Oregon Shakespeare Festival commissioned professional translation of the entire Shakespeare canon, including disputed works such as Edward III,[103] into contemporary vernacular English; in 2019, off-off-Broadway, the canon was premiered in a month-long series of staged readings.

Modern translation is applicable to any language with a long literary history. For example, in Japanese the 11th-century Tale of Genji is generally read in modern translation (see "Genji: modern readership").

Modern translation often involves literary scholarship and textual revision, as there is frequently not one single canonical text. This is particularly noteworthy in the case of the Bible and Shakespeare, where modern scholarship can result in substantive textual changes.

Anna North writes: "Translating the long-dead language Homer used — a variant of ancient Greek called Homeric Greek — into contemporary English is no easy task, and translators bring their own skills, opinions, and stylistic sensibilities to the text. The result is that every

translation is different, almost a new poem in itself." An example is Emily Wilson's 2017 translation of Homer's Odyssey, where by conscious choice Wilson "lays bare the morals of its time and place, and invites us to consider how different they are from our own, and how similar."

Modern translation meets with opposition from some traditionalists. In English, some readers prefer the Authorized King James Version of the Bible to modern translations, and Shakespeare in the original of ca. 1600 to modern translations.