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(1742-1813)

FROM PROLOGUE TO *LE ARTE DE TRADUCIR LE IDIOMA FRANCÉS AL CASTELLANO* (Madrid, 1776)

If all languages were cast in the same mould, as it were, the production of servilely literal translations would be less difficult – although it would always take hard work to give to the copy the same harmony, elegance, rhythm and facility as those of the original. But as the diverse character of languages almost never permits literal translations, a translator who is freed from this slavery by circumstances, can not remain innocent of a certain licence, which is engendered by the liberty of searching for things analogous and equivalent to the model. And it is these that bring precision, energy and beauty. Is it possible for experts in our language to find out how deeply one can penetrate into a foreign language? For one can not do a good translation without a perfect knowledge of both.

Some way must be found to allow the original to show through the copy; and in translating, one must be always faithful to the sense, and if possible, to the very letter of the author. Authors have their good and bad qualities. These, which constitute their character must be kept in all languages. Some are spare, some rich; some hard, others flowing etc. And enabling readers to judge the merits of the original is precisely revealing the whole physionomy of the author. This is not to say that the translator must bend himself to translate word for word without keeping their quality and force. Insofar as the character of the language will permit, he must follow the figures, images, rhythm and method, as authors always differ according to these qualities, for, no matter the language, it is through these elements that their characteristics come. But as there can be excess in everything, art serves as a moderator. There do exist very literal translations whose authors could not shake off the yoke of an indiscreet exactitude; it is so difficult to set the bounds of judicious timidity and happy licence. Many prefer free translation, and they have reason: it is easier to disfigure the original, and, although less spectacular, most difficult to represent it with fidelity.

This liberty must only be pardoned in the particular places where it is called for in making the passage reflect more closely the riches of the original. Then the translator puts

himself in the shoes of the author and must take on his sentiments, making himself copy without seeming to do so. He who shortens or abbreviates what the author writes at length or amplifies, he who strips what the author has made elaborate, he who retouches what is perfect, or papers over defects, paints an original instead of a copy and passes from translation to free composition.

Some think that, by embedding the principal ideas of the original in the new method of reasoning brought by the version, they have done their duty by the public. For many authors are notable not so much by their thoughts as by the choice and creation of expressions and signs to communicate them with greater clarity, force and energy. Is not this type of choice the issue of the diverse tastes, customs, education, climate, government and situation of men? The Persian, Russian, Italian, Englishman, Frenchman, German and Spaniard, all have different interests, tastes and imagination by which they give more or less strength and force to their expressions.

A translation will always be imperfect while we can not use it to examine and come to know the character of the nation through that of the author. Each nation has its own; and it results from the use of certain comparisons, images, figures and manners of speaking, which by reason of their peculiarity and novelty shock our sensibilities. Thus many translators, either from arrogance, or indifference, or even from ignorance, produce imperfect work. For they have either given preference to the characteristics of their own nation or the taste of their own time, or they have not taken the trouble to came to know the philosophy behind the customs of the different idioms. Some have even succeeded in making a Swede speak like an Arab.

How many translators there are who claim to add grace to their original, that is, who make it more sophisticated, more florid and more elevated, by substituting other ideas and sentences on their own responsibility? Who has said to them that the author would have chosen another way of reasoning, a style other than that proper to his mode of thinking, to the time in which he lived, to the material he treated? Who has guaranteed them against faulty taste so that they are protected against taking for ignoble, improper, base and obscure what is really gracious, brilliant, simple and precise? If this freedom was there for the taking, we would not have bad authors. But neither would we be able to distinguish the extraordinary geniuses from the commonplace and the middling.

Translated works must not be intended so much to teach one's own language, as to show how other peoples speak. In translations dealing with morals, politics, physics and economics, the quality of the subjects, the truth of the instructions, the force of the ideas and the excellence of the method constitute the purpose. But in literature, the translator must aim for both purposes when Eloquence has made solid progress in the country of the author. Then more blame attaches to the translator if he gives us an altered text in an effort to accomodate the oratorical style to the local taste and the usual sentence structure of his language, or if he is too scrupulous in following his text, carrying over even the idioms, those children of grammatical structure or of the sterility of the language, and not bringing over the general primitive laws of eloquence, which are always the same in all places, even if, in some languages, because of the corruption of taste, or for other reasons, physical or moral, they have been neglected or forgotten. This is the way in which he mistakes a shadow for a body.

In those cases, the translator is in duty bound to avoid all the habitual idioms characteristic of the original language, because the qualities of a piece of literature and of style in general do not depend on the sentence shapes or the style qualities peculiar to a nation. It is to this point that we are directing the present work and for this reason that its introduction speaks of the character of languages.

Languages have a particular character which makes them distinctive. This diversity, which som call *genius* or *characteristic*, consists in the different aptitudes for expressing what is, logically speaking, the same idea, even if they can all adapt themselves to the different genres of style and composition. There are three types of character to be distinguished in a language; and when these are combine in a work, they form the general "genius" of a language. The first is the grammatical character (or the logical), the second is the habitual, the third, the moral, which includes the figurative or poetical...