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1536-1546:
TEN YEARS THAT CHANGED
THE PERCEPTION OF THE TRANSLATOR

THOSE WHO SUPPOSE TRANSLATORS lead hard lives today might want to consider the fate of their Sixteenth Century colleagues. During the ten years between 1536 and 1546, three famous translators met their death. One was tortured first and then burned at the stake in that great center of civilization, Paris. The second was strangled and then burnt in the city of Antwerp. And even though our third colleague died more naturally, it wasn't because half of Europe didn't long to see him hanged, drawn, quartered, and impaled in pieces.

In the most dramatic of these cases, the ostensible reason for the translator's execution was that he had inserted three extra words in his translation, words not clearly present in the original. And in this one particular case, the "accreditation experts" were at least literally correct. The original Greek from *Axiochus*, a philosophical dialogue attributed to Plato, ran as follows, as transliterated into English:

Hoti peri men tous zôntas ouk estin, hoi de apothanontes ouk eisin· hôste oute peri se nun estin, ou gar tethnêkas oute ei ti pathois, estai peri se· su gar ouk esei.

The translation by Étienne Dolet, our profession's most famous martyr, did in fact add three extra words and a great many others besides, though one of his biographers defends their use as adding to the clarity:

Pour ce qu'il est certain que la mort n'est point aux vivants: et quant aux defuncts, ilz ne sont plus: donques la mort les attouches encore moins. Parquoy elle ne peult rien sur toy, car tu n'est pas encores prest à deceder; et quand tu seras décédé, elle n'y pourra rien aussi, attendu que tu ne seras plus rien du tout. *(Sixteenth Century text as cited by Ballard and Copley-Christie)*

The Greek is difficult, to say the least, though not because the words are at all obscure or exotic: in fact any second-year Greek student is likely to have encountered them. It is the particle-ridden and elliptical nature of these outwardly simple words that presents the problem, and few translators could make any sense of the passage *without* adding words to the text. I will take the easy way out and first translate Dolet's own translation from the French:

Since it is certain that death is not at all among the living: and as for the dead, they no longer are: therefore, death touches them even less. And hence death can do nothing to you, for you are not yet ready to die, and when you have died, death will also not be able to do anything, since you will no longer be *anything at all*.

In both the French and the English, it is the last three italicized words that furnished the grounds for execution. I am grateful to our colleague Dr. John Siolas for providing a more literal rendering of the Greek text (which he studied in school), as it highlights some of the problems this text has presented for various translators:

Hence, this is not for those who have lived, and not for those who have died; therefore, neither one [is] for you, you have not died, nor have you suffered; these have not yet happened to you.

Experienced translators are likely to recognize the nature of the problem. One requires truly deep knowledge of such texts to be absolutely certain of their meaning. So much is elliptical or left unsaid or couched in extremely simple terms that the worst offense Dolet can be charged with is perhaps excessive zeal. Unfortunately his accusers of 1546 were equally zealous, and it was their judgment which finally brought him him, at the age of 37, to the stake.

A humanist to the core, Dolet spent his early youth in the Montparnasse of his day, the University of Padua, where pantheism and materialism both flourished, making it almost *de rigueur* to deny the immortality of the soul. Always a bit headstrong, at the age of only 25 Dolet killed a man, and a part of his life was spent in prison or on the run. He numbered Rabelais among his friends.

But Dolet's greatest interest for ATA members is his work as a translator and printer. He translated scores of works himself and published many others by his colleagues. He is also acclaimed in France as the first true theoretician in our field, though Luther or even Cicero might have equal claim.

Such a title springs from a thin pamphlet of 1540 with the title *La manière de bien traduire d'une langue en aultre*. It reduces translation to five fairly familiar points, one of which bears repeating in the light of Dolet's subsequent fate. Following Cicero, he wrote:

"The third point is that while translating, you must not be enslaved to the extent of rendering word for word. And if anyone does so, this comes from his impoverishment and deficiency of wit. Because if he possesses the above-mentioned qualities (which are needed in a good translator), without having regard for word order, he will concentrate on the meaning and handle things so that the intention of the author is expressed, while heedfully maintaining the propriety of both languages. And in this regard, it is excessive superstition (might I say stupidity or ignorance?) to begin one's translation at the start of the sentence. But if by reversing the word order, you express the intention of your author, no one can take you to task for it. I do not wish to remain silent here about the foolishness of some translators, who instead of freedom submit to servitude."

This rule is routinely followed today by most translators of literary works, stage plays, advertising texts, and almost all titles, headlines or slogans, while even those who work with diplomatic or legal texts have often found that what may be the *mot juste* in one language may not be the *mot juste* in another. Granted, this advice may be less useful for technical translators, though they too are likely to encounter passages where it makes sense. It might perhaps prove useful to obtain a ruling from the ATA Accreditation Committee on Dolet's principle and to discover whether they would have voted for or against his execution. The worst that can happen to those following such a rule today is that they will flunk our exam. For Dolet the consequences were somewhat more severe.

The second translator to die for his transgressions was William Tyndale, who came close to reaching the ripe old age of 44. More motivated by religious devotion than humanist passion, when he was only 20 he was so impressed by Luther's teachings that his friends

in England expressed alarm. When he proposed imitating Luther's feat and translating the Bible into English, he was forced to flee to the then liberal shores of Germany. He still had to dodge arrest and run from printer to printer, but he finally succeeded in creating an English version of both the Christian texts and the Torah, which were then smuggled into England. For this feat his fellow church revisionist and fellow religious scholar Henry VIII put a price on Tyndale's head and eventually had him arrested in Belgium, where he was put to death in 1536 after spending a year in prison. His translation of the Bible is credited with influencing the later King James version.

The last of our three "translator-warriors," the one man so many would have rejoiced to see crucified, was the most successful both as a translator and as a charismatic figure. Let's listen to him talking about our craft:

And it's often happened to us that we've searched and asked for fourteen days—even for three or four weeks—after a single word, and in all that time we haven't found it.

And I don't know if one can express the word *Liebe* (love) just as sincerely and fully in Latin or in other languages, so that it sounds and pounds through all the senses, as it does in our language.

Dear friend, now it's in German and finished; anyone can read and study the text; you can let your eyes run over three or four pages without ever hitting on a snag; and you don't even notice the stones and tree stumps that were there, because now you pass over all that as though on a well-polished surface; but we really had to sweat and take great pains before we could clear that road of stones and stumps.

In their homespun, self-promoting, nationalistic tone, these can only be the words of Martin Luther himself in his *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen* of 1530. It is easy enough to see from these passages how he would have provoked strong reactions from supporters and enemies alike.

Until the passage of these ten pivotal years, translators in the West had been viewed far more readily as heroes than as villains. They had opened all the ancient arts and sciences to the world around them, not only philosophy, astronomy, and geometry but the more

advanced range of Arab mathematics, not to mention medicine, optics, and other sciences. They had even opened the door to the enormously popular studies of alchemy, geomancy, and astrology. As Giordano Bruno himself would say: "From translation all science had its off-spring."

After 1546 this view of our field began to change, as both Ballard and Steiner observe, and increasing emphasis would be placed on the inadequacy of translators and even the translation process itself. Despite the remarkable work of poet-translators like Chapman, Dryden, and Pope, it is this view which has largely prevailed until the present day. Thus, whenever we claim that we are going to change the public perception of the translator—which this writer firmly believes is possible—we are not speaking of a simple overnight cure but of diagnosing and treating a complex and durable set of social attitudes, which may indeed have roots reaching back as long as 450 years ago.

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Reference: http://language.home.sprynet.com/trandex.htm#tranhist