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THE HISTORIAN AS TRANSLATOR: AN INTRODUCTION

Diplomats, unlike most historians, are acutely aware of translation as a means of manipulation. In his *Translating History*, the Russian interpreter Igor Korchilov describes how President Ronald Reagan, welcoming Mikhail Gorbachev to Washington on December 8, 1987, pointed out the significance of this meeting, "not of allies, but of adversaries." The American translator, whose voice was heard throughout the Soviet Union, in his carefully prepared translation chose the Russian word for "competitors" (*soperniki*). Korchilov, standing in the second row, whispered in the Soviet foreign minister's ear that a closer translation was *protivniki*. The official Soviet reports of Reagan's speech, however, stuck to the bowdlerizing "competitors" because the Soviet leadership at home wanted to emphasize its success in overcoming the hostile image of an enemy formerly pervasive in the West. *1*The television and radio audience in the Soviet Union did not know they were misled, nor will Russian historians who study the Russian transcript of Reagan's speech.

The following round table, like Korchilov, aims to alert us to the dangers inherent in translating. Straightforward manipulation for an easily recognizable purpose is not the real problem. Historians as readers and authors of translations encounter a severer challenge, the limits of translatability. Those limits comprise not just language barriers that can be jumped by sufficiently trained experts, but cultural predispositions that operate like a filter. If the original meaning is to percolate through the filter, patient professionals must mediate and interpret in a comprehensive way between two cultures.

Every historian encounters the language and culture filter. This is especially true for students of American history outside the United States, whether they publish and teach in a language other than English or use English in a culturally distinct environment where it is not the prevailing mother tongue, such as India or Norway. But in preparing this round table we discovered to our surprise that historians have not gone on record to share their experiences and their attempts to come to terms with their own role as translators and cross-cultural mediators.

Even American scholars who think about the impact of American political institutions and ideas abroad have ignored the language and culture filter. A prominent example is the political scientist Carl J. Friedrich, who left Germany in the 1920s for Harvard University. His lectures on the impact of American constitutionalism abroad carefully surveyed French, Spanish, German, and other perceptions of the American system of government throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries without ever discussing the potentially distorting effects of translation. *2*Few American scholars who learned English as adult refugees from Nazi terror in Europe have told us in print about their agonies as they were forced to "translate" themselves. *3*Even more surprising, no student of American historiography, its methods and theory of knowledge, has so far

enriched the unusually sophisticated pages of the journal *History and Theory* with an analysis of the pitfalls and conundrums translating historians and readers of translated historiography face. But the graduate student consulting the guide to historical research edited by the French-born and -educated Jacques Barzun will find essential advice in the chapter "The Arts of Quoting and Translating." Barzun's entreating tone and convincing examples of bad translations from French betray the agonies induced in the bilingual author by, for example, Henry Reeve's rendering of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Barzun warns against false literalism that violates usage in the receiving language, and he upholds the highest of standards: "One can translate faithfully only from a language one knows like a native into a language one knows like a practiced writer." He presupposed, and the essays in this round table confirm, that the historical translator also needs expert knowledge of the subject matter. *4*

Modern translation studies have developed in connection with comparative literature and linguistics and thrive on the insight that re-creating the evocative language of novels, poems, and drama so as to awaken in readers a reaction paralleling that of readers of the original is often difficult and at times impossible. *5*In this round table we observe that translating historical narrative in its naïve storytelling mode as well as in its argumentative analytical style -- which includes the translation of documentary or source material -- is no less demanding and no less dependent on cultural empathy and mastery of both languages than translating fiction is. "A traditional English snobbery," the British linguist Peter Newmark observed in 1981, "puts literary translation on a pedestal and regards other translation as hackwork, or less important, or easier." Newmark insists on scrupulously exact rendering of "language, structures and content, whether the piece is scientific or poetic, philosophical or fictional." *6*

As investigators of what has happened, historians are placed midway between those who imagine what might have happened or should happen and scientists who describe and explain what is actually happening in the physical world. Translators in the sciences, engineering, and medicine do not enjoy the intellectual delights of playing with various possibilities of meaning in the original text and the richness of connotations in the translated text. There is "true" and "false," and mistakes can kill. Hence translators in the sciences unashamedly call for simpleminded "quality in translation" and warn that the unqualified translator who does not understand the research report as completely as the scientist who carried out the reported experiment may cause havoc. *7*The soft nature of the objects of their texts will not always allow translating historians to meet the hard criteria of "true" and "false" that translating scientists have to insist on. But we should cultivate a greater awareness of the issues involved and a stronger commitment to the ideal of taking the reader in the other language as close as possible to the meaning of the original text. There are uninformed, garbled, and intentionally misleading translations. Theoreticians of knowledge may muse over their existence and their demonstration of the frailties of the human mind; translating historians should aim to correct them.

In their arduous task, translating historians will be aided by the analytical tools developed by linguists. Their models acknowledge the active, selecting, and determining role translators play when they (1) analyze the original text or "message" into its "simplest and structurally clearest forms"; (2) transfer them into the "receptor" language;

and (3) reformulate them in the receptor language for the specific audience to be addressed. The translator's searching role in decomposing and recomposing has been likened to that of a hiker,

> who finds a stream he must cross is so deep and the current so swift that he cannot risk crossing over directly from one point to another. Therefore, he goes downstream to a ford, at which point the transfer from one side to another can be made with the least possible danger to himself and his equipment. He can then go back upstream to the point which best suits him.

The translator of historical nonfiction surely will have to be the most tireless of hikers on both shores of the cultural as well as temporal divide in his effort to comprehend the historical document and to present its content and meaning to the contemporary reader of another language. *8*

If a thing or concept does not exist in the receptor language, there are basically five solutions: (1) importing or implanting the foreign term as a loan word, for example, "jury" remains -- Germanized merely by capitalization -- *Jury;* (2) describing and explaining the foreign institution in familiar words, for example, "bill" becomes *Gesetzesentwurf* (draft of a law); (3) substituting a familiar name for a roughly similar institution, for example, "trial by jury" becomes *Schöffengericht* (court of jurors); (4) naturalizing the word with a loan translation, for example, "fundamental law" becomes *Grundgesetz* (ground law); and (5) paraphrasing loosely, for example, "common law" becomes *das ungeschriebene englische Gewohnheits-und Fallrecht* (the unwritten English customary and case law). *9*In addition, translators from one European language to another have to guard against so-called false friends, words such as "liberal" and "federal" that do not mean the same things in United States and European history. *10* The following case studies provide examples and combinations of all of these categories.

The translation should not, however, let readers forget they are reading a translation. Otherwise, they might become victims of an imaginary familiarity. This can happen when, for instance, the American "farmer" becomes the French *fermier* or the German *Bauer*. French or German readers would be tempted by those words to project onto the American prairie emotions they developed as children growing up in more or less gardened landscapes. To avoid this temptation, Germans use *die Farm* and *der Farmer* as transplanted loan words in texts concerning America, Australia, and Africa. Small-scale agriculturalists in Asian countries such as Vietnamese rice farmers are, however, called *Bauern* (peasants). That a translation should read like an original, is an ideal to aim at, but markers of distinction, reminders of distance and otherness (if necessary, the clumsy device of a translator's footnote) must remain if the authenticity of the content requires it.

A dramatic interpretive choice is demonstrated by Tadashi Aruga's and Frank Li's observations on the Japanese or Chinese translator's decision in favor of a certain concept for the supreme being, god, or creator: One designates the supreme being or universal reason in Confucian or Shinto thought; another is reserved for the God of the Judeo-Christian and Muslim traditions. Depending on the choice, the translation of the

American Declaration of Independence sounds relevant or irrelevant in the Japanese or Chinese cultural setting. *11*

This stark example of the controlling function of the language and culture filter of the receptor language illustrates why the translating historian has to make every effort to convey the original meaning of the text. Especially with documentary texts such as constitutions and other foundational manifestos, the historian's first task is fully to understand the situation in which the document was created, including the authors' "original intent" and rhetoric. We have to know, for instance, that "men" in "all men are created equal," as in John Locke's *Two Treatises on Government* and similar philosophical parlance, meant "human beings" and that a gender-neutral translation is called for. *12* We need to know the difference between "people" and "nation" in 1776. The professional historian translating into Polish was not free to choose *narod* (nation) instead of *lud* (much closer to Thomas Jefferson's "people") in order to make a political statement in the context of opposition to the then-ruling Communist regime. The translator who chose to do so fulfilled another function than that of the translating historian. *13* The professional historian as translator has no option but to search for the words in the living language that most closely describe the original situation and function of the document to contemporary readers. To do this, we can take advantage of our scholarly-argumentative discourse. We do not have to live up to the unrealistic expectations that translators of fiction and poetry struggle to fullfil, the illusory demand for one-on-one equivalences, metaphor by metaphor, rhyme by rhyme. *14* We can interrupt the smoothly flowing text with asides and footnotes that remind readers they are dealing with a translated historical document. We can even point out alternative translations and explain their strengths and weaknesses. It is clearly not the historian's task to compose a self-explanatory pseudodocument, a declaration of independence vintage 1999 in German or Japanese. That would be like rewriting *Hamlet* for actors wearing business suits. Nor is it our task to fake an eighteenth-century text. That would be like reenacting the shooting on the Lexington Common in a Disney theme park. Instead, we are to make today's readers aware of the original meaning. Our mission is to recognize differences in language and thought, in habits and assumptions, that characterize periods. Practiced in this way, historical translation, especially of documentary texts, is part of the core of our professional responsibility: explaining change over time.

Conscientious historians may at times be tempted to declare defeat and call translation impossible. But theoreticians of communication console us with the profound insight that "absolute communication is impossible . . . not only between languages but also within a language," but "effective interlingual communication is always possible, despite seemingly enormous differences in linguistic structures and cultural features," mainly because of "the common core of human experience." *15* To which the historian of translation need only add: Impossible or not, translation has been done, more or less perfectly, since the dawn of recorded history. Our modern world of incessant interlingual and intercultural communication and exchange -- intellectual and cultural as well as commercial -- would never have come into being without it. Historiography since Thucydides has depended on it. What has been lacking is open discussion of the limits, chances, and pitfalls, the achievements and failures of scholarly historical translation.

Without such discussion internationalizing the teaching of, and research in, American history will be incomplete.

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1. Igor Korchilov, *Translating History: Thirty Years on the Front Lines of Diplomacy with a Top Russian Interpreter* (New York, 1997), 65 - 66.

2. Carl J. Friedrich, *The Impact of American Constitutionalism Abroad* (Boston, 1967). Translation and the filter of language do not figure in the contributions to a bicentennial conference volume that involved scholars from France, the Netherlands, Germany, the Soviet Union, Mexico, Spain, and Japan. See Elizabeth Hamer Kegan, ed., *The Impact of the American Revolution Abroad* (Washington, 1976).

3. A moving example is an autobiographical chapter "Living in Translation," in Gerda Lerner, *Why History Matters: Life and Thought* (New York, 1997), 33 - 49. On translation, she concluded that "the overtones and resonances are more significant than the literal meaning. If a choice has to be made, I would choose texture over mere information." *Ibid.* , 38.

4. Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher* (New York, 1992), 282 - 95, esp. 293.

5. For an annotated chronological bibliography, 46 *b.c.* to 1958 *a.d.* , see the anthology Reuben A. Brower, ed., *On Translation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959). On the rich experience in translating the Old and New Testaments, see Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden, 1964). For analytical concepts of practical use to the translator, see John C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics* (London, 1965). On the problems translators have to solve, including those in translating of nonfiction, see Peter Newmark, *Approaches to Translation* (Oxford, Eng., 1981). Armin Paul Frank and team, "Toward a Cultural History of Literary Translation: An Exploration of Issues and Problems in Researching the Translational Exchange between the USA and Germany," *REAL: The Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, 4 (1986), 317 - 80; the special issue "Focus on Literary Translations," *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 35 (no. 1, 1990). The lack of, and need for, a history of translation into or out of American English was confirmed by Lawrence Alan Rosenwald, "Translation," in *A Companion to American Thought*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and James T. Kloppenberg (Oxford, Eng., 1995), 685 - 87. Those who translate into or out of English will profit from Jean Darbelnet and Jean-Paul Vinay, *Comparative Stylistics of French and English: A Methodology for Translation*, trans. Juan C. Sager and M.-J. Hamel (Amsterdam, 1995), esp. 30 - 50.

6. Newmark, *Approaches to Translation*, 5 - 6.

7. R. W. Jumpelt, "Methodological Approaches to Science Translation," in *Quality in Translation: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the International*

Federation of Translators in Bad Godesberg, 1959, ed. Edmond Cary and R. W. Jumpelt (Oxford, Eng., 1963), 267 - 81.

8. Eugene A. Nida, *Language Structure and Translation* (Stanford, 1975), 79. "Receptor" instead of "target" language expresses the idea that the translated text is not a bullet that hits or misses a target. The new text is a message that, like the original, needs decoding by the reader. *Ibid.* , 98, 80.

9. Adapted from Newmark, *Approaches to Translation,* 7.

10. I thank Professor Jacques Portes of the University of Paris VIII, Vincennes - Saint-Denis, for sharing his experience as a translating historian with me. He is fully aware of the dangers involved in his translating John Marshall's opinion in *Marbury v. Madison* and then having students discuss the case on the basis of his words. For translations of his, see Marie-France Toinet, *La Cour Suprême: Les grands arrêts* (Paris, 1989).

11. See below, Tadashi Aruga, "The Declaration of Independence in Japan: Translation and Transplantation, 1854 - 1997," *Journal of American History*, 85 (March 1999), 1412-13, 1419; and Frank Li, "East Is East and West Is West: Did the Twain Ever Meet? The Declaration of Independence in China," *ibid.* , 1435, 1441-42.

12. Reformers rightly argued even in 1776 that "all men are created equal" allowed no room for the enslavement of men or women. See Willi Paul Adams, *The First American Constitutions: Republican Ideology and the Making of the State Constitutions in the Revolutionary Era*, trans. Rita Kimber and Robert Kimber (Chapel Hill, 1980), 164 - 76.

13. See below, Jerzy Kutnik, "The Declaration of Independence in Poland," *Journal of American History*, 85 (March 1999), 1387-88.

14. For the most instructive demonstration *in vivo* of literary translation I am aware of, see Robert Bly, *The Eight Stages of Translation* (Boston, 1983).

15. Nida, *Language Structure and Translation,* 90.

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