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## L'Ordre Naturel and Charles Batteux: à bas les philosophes

Among the best loved and least remembered figures of eighteenth century France is l'abbé Charles Batteux (1713-1780), professor of Rhetoric at Rheims, Professor of Greek and Latin at the Collège militaire royal. This list of his relevant works gives only the reprints listed in the British Library, Library of Congress, and the Bibliothèque nationale (Paris):

*Cours de belles lettres*, 1746/47, 1753  
*Principes de littérature*, (an amplified version of the above) 1753, 1763, 1764, 1775, 1788, 1824, 1802, 1809, 1824  
Translated into German, 1761, 1762, 1763, 1769  
Translated into English, 1761  
Translated into Spanish, 1797  
Translated into French, 5 edition 1816  
*Priticiples of Translation*. Edinburgh, 1760 (Part 3 §4 of his *Principes*).  
*De la construction oratoire*, 1763  
*Traduction d'Horace*, 1750, 1768, 1803, 1813, 1823  
*Les quatre poétiques d'Aristote, d'Horace, de Vidal & de Boileau*, 1771, 1782, 1825  
His remarks on Aristotle were translated and annexed to a Spanish version of the *Poetics* (1778)  
*Nouvel examen du préjugé sur l'inversion*, 1767  
*Traité de l'arrangement des mots, traduit du grec de Denys d'Halicarnasse*, 1788  
Translated into French, 1827

We know a fair amount about his life – the letter to his nephews prefaced to the posthumous edition of his *Dionysius of Halicarnassus* gives a rather engaging picture of a man who owed all to patronage and was quite happy to work within the system. His obituary and entries in *the Biographie universelle* and Chalmers's *Biographical Dictionary* give the image of a kindly scholar who was loved and respected for his academic and educational skill, his academic rigour and his devotion to his poor relations. The only sour notes in all this are adverse comments on the rather stiff style of his translations of the classics:

The style is strongly tinged with a metaphysical air, a stiff and dry précision reigns through the whole, but a little tempered by choice examples by which

the author has embellished his lessons (Chalmers 1812: s.v. Batteux).

And the autobiographical letter to his nephews hints that he had suffered from the skullduggery to which orthodox academics subject any scholar who dates swim against the current. Certainly, for a man who was asked to revise the language curriculum of the Royal Colleges, and whose works were published well into the nineteenth century, Batteux is intensely unknown, even in standard histories of linguistics.

It may well have been his own fault. It would seem that most of his career was devoted to a sustained attack on the rationalist view la *grammaire générale* had of word order (cf. Scaglione 1983:200). His *Réflexions sur la langue française* prefaced to the posthumous Dionysius is quite blunt about his attitude to the contemporary rationalise climate in language study:

L'étude de la Philosophie et des Philosophes anciens, de leurs recherches et de leur ignorance sur les objets les plus interessans de la vie, avoient augmenté en moi cette persuasion à tel point, que j'ai eu besoin de revenir à la philosophie du peuple, pour me défendre de celle des Philosophes, qui jetoit de noir sur mes pensées (Batteux 1788:208).

Cette persuasion was that

... notre langue étant fixée par ses formes dans l'arrangement des mots, et la Latine jouissant de la plus parfaite liberté,... ce n'étoit pas chez nous qu'il falloit chercher les loix que la nature préscrit sur l'arrangement des mots, & qu'on ne pouvoit les rencontrer, s'il y en avoit, que dans les langues libres... (Batteux 1788:208)

In spite of the seeming skepticism of *s'il y en avoit* in the above quotation Batteux is enough of an eighteenth-century academic to assume that sentence orders are naturally determined. For art follows nature, and language in all its manifestations is an art, hence the inadequacy of the completely rational *ordre métaphysique*. He applies his Aristotelian tag through the sensualist principle familiar from Condillac and Locke, *la pensée et l'expression sont l'image l'une de l'autre*:

Le lieu et la liaison des idées ne tiennent point aux langues, elles ne tiennent qu'à l'esprit, au bon sens, au raisonnement. Or l'esprit et le raisonnement ont le même procédé en françois qu'en latin (Batteux 1753 V. 239).

In the fifth volume of *Principes de littérature* Batteux attacked this question from two angles: a closely argued discussion of rhetoric as a theory of language, and a careful démonstration of translation as a language act. He sees three possible principles which theoretically may guide sentence order: grammar, metaphysics and *l'intérêt ou le point de vue de celui qui parle*. The grammatical order, that is subject followed by verb followed by object, he dismisses as artificiel, unnatural and therefore harmful:

L'ordre grammatical est une entrave donnée à l'esprit et aux idées, plutôt qu'une règle de construction. Attachée au génie de l'analogie particulière d'une langue, nulle part il n'est absolument le même. Il y a des langues où il est précisément le contraire de ce qu'il est dans d'autres langues : ce qui ne pourroit arriver s'il étoit naturel. (Batteux 1753 V. 10-1 1)

Note the denial that there is such a thing as a grammatical universal. Batteux does not even bother to counter the philosophers' theory that a natural sentence being bound by the *ordre de l'entendement*, it began with the doer (the grammatical subject), continued with the action (finite verb), and finished with the result (the object). By implication he refutes Charles Maupas's famous principle that French was the only language that consistently followed this natural order, and ridicules the claim (cf. Cordemoy in *Discours physique de la parole*) that sound grammatical concepts followed nature. The metaphysical order too is outside the normal run of language use: "Il en est de même de l'ordre métaphysique. Il peut être bon quelquefois pour les savans, quand ils discutent ou qu'ils analysent leurs idées" (Batteux 1753 V. 11). And thus the third, le *point de vue de celui qui parle*, he claims as the only natural sentence order: "... l'arrangement naturel des mots est réglé par l'importance des objets." For only in this way can one attain the *naïveté* essentiel in language use.

Batteux speaks of the sentence as a process of constructing meaning. It begins with a *début* and goes to a *but*. The *début* is his *objet important*, which is not necessarily the grammatical subject, as the general grammarians taught, but can be any predominant idea represented by any part of speech. Thus while his sentences have beginnings they do not have ends, but expressive goals. Batteux's mentor for this flagrantly functional attitude is Dionysius of Halicarnassus, which explains why Batteux does not acknowledge Condillac, the more modern authority. He presents his translation of Dionysius as a supplement to the posthumous edition of *Principes de littérature*. Dionysius derives sentence orders from three expressive principles: intellectual priorities, affective priorities, and audial priorities. Batteux reduces them all to the one principle: "L'ordre naturel est que l'objet important soit à la tête" (Batteux 1788 V. § 9). At least in appearance this idea could have been taken from Condillac. Certainly Batteux

agrees with him that language is not a direct image of reality, but an image of the speaker's reaction to reality. It is for this reason that the audial aspect of language ranks with the intellectual and affective, and can override either. Though he admits that his ideas are much more congenial to the Classical Languages with their relatively free word-orders, he demonstrates quite convincingly that French is quite flexible enough to abandon the "grammatical wordorder", and does so by inversion of normal sentence orders, a rather sensitive subject for both him and his adversaries.

The section on translation at the end of Part 3 of the *Principes de littérature* is based on a type of contrastive discourse analysis between Latin and French. His English and German translations pay lip service to French as the language of comparison used by the author, but make a spectacularly successful job of acclimatising Batteux to their own languages. Batteux's exploits to the fullest his principle that rhetorical priorities are more natural and universal than grammatical. His first axiom is that the translator must not meddle with

... l'ordre des choses, soit faits, soit raisonnemens; puisque cet ordre est le même dans toutes les langues, & qu'il tient à la nature de l'homme plutôt au génie particulier des Nations (Batteux 1753 V. 269).

His second rule is: "Qu'on doit conserver aussi l'ordre des idées, au du moins celui des membres..." (Batteux 1753 V.269). And the third is that one must preserve the periods of the source text in the target:

... parce qu'une période n'est qu'une pensée composée de plusieurs autres pensées, qui se lient entre eux par des rapports intrinsèques; et que cette liaison est la vie de ces pensées, & l'objet principal de celui qui parle (Batteux 1753 V. 269).

His first rule is obviously intended to deal with conceptual universals as expressed in sentences; rules 2 and 3 are concerned with particular manifestations of these universals in individual languages.

It is worth looking at what is meant by *pensée* here. Furetière 1690 *s.v. pensée*, gives two meanings of interest to us:

Tout ce qui vient dans l'esprit, dans l'imagination, dans la mémoire. ... se dit aussi de quelque belle parole, de quelque dit notable d'un homme d'autorité.

Batteux uses both of these meanings. *Pensée* is clearly semantic, and not grammatical.

*Idée* is a conceptuel primitive usually expressed by a word no matter its part of speech, *membre* is a phrase or clause, *Choses, faits and raisonnemens* seem to be relatively general terms meaning ideas in isolation, or ideas connected one to another, no matter their part of speech. It is not surprising then that rule 4 enjoins preserving all the conjunctions unless they can be compensated for functionally.

In his version of Cicero's *Pro Archia* ii. 3 offered as an illustration of his ideas on translation, Batteux 1753 V.271-272 also demonstrates his theories on language:

Sed ne cui vestrum mirum esse videatur, me in quaestione legitima, & in iudicio publico, cum res agatur apud Praetorem populi Romani lectissimum virum, & apud serenissimos Iudices, tanto conventu hominum, ac frequentia, hoc uti genere dicendi, quod non modo a consuetudine iudiciorum, verum etiam, a forensi sermone abhorreat: quaeso a vobis, ut in hac causa mihi detis hanc veniam, accommodatam huic reo, vobis, quemadmodum spero, non molestam; ut me, pro summo poeta, atque eruditissimo homine dicentem, hoc concursu hominum litteratissimorum, hac vestra humanitate, hoc denique Praetore exercente iudicium, patiamini de studiis humanitatis ac litterarum paulo loqui liberius; & in eiusmodi persona, quae propter otium ac studium minime in iudiciis periculisque tractata est, uti prope novo quodam est inusitato genere dicendi.

His translation of this sentence, made *sans la couper, is:*

Mais comme l'affaire que je plaide est une question de droit, une cause publique, qui est porté au tribunal du Préteur du peuple Romain, & devant les Juges les plus austères; & que cependant j'ai dessein de la traiter d'une manière qui paroitra peu conforme à l'usage du barreau : j'ai, Messieurs, à vous demander une grace, que vous ne pouvez me refuser, eu egard à la condition de celui que je défends, & dont j'espere que vous ne vous repentirez pas vous-mêmes : c'est qu'ayant à parler pour un poëte célèbre, pour un savant, en présence de tant de gens de Lettres, devant des Juges si polis, & un Préteur si éclairé, vous me permettiez de m'etendre avec quelque liberté sur le mérite des Lettres : & que, comme je représente un homme qui est étranger dans les affaires, & qui ne connoit que l'étude & les livres, vous trouviez bon que je m'exprime moi-même d'une manière nouvelle, & qui pourra paroître étrangere dans le barreau.

The Cicero gobbet is a good illustration of his methods; and his claims for it recall Cicero *De optimo genere oratorum* v. 14: "Si on la coupoit, les membres cesseraient d'avoir les mêmes formes & les mêmes regards, & le traducteur seroit infidele" (Batteux 1753 V. 272). This principle of translation is not concerned with just rhetoric: it derives from the major pillar of Batteux's theory of language, the communicative importance of linkage between ideas *or pensées*: "cette liaison est la vie de ces pensées, & l'objet principal de celui qui parle" (Batteux 1753 V.27). Though his version of Cicero does seem to keep the Latin periodic structure, follow the order of its members, and preserve its legal rotundity in all its length, it shows extreme differences in clausal relationships: (Cicero's *cum res agatur*.... a clause of reason, becomes a relative clause, for example). As well there is considerable expansion of phrases into full clauses, as at the end of the passage. There Cicero's *prope novo quodam est inusitato genere dicendi* becomes *d'une manière nouvelle, & qui pourra paroître étrangere dans le barreau*. Batteux's claim that he has not cut the period is convincing only if one takes his punctuation at face value: I am sure a modern would put a full stop before *c'est*: Batteux's colon is a rhetorical punctuation mark not a grammatical, indicating a continuity of thought through the passage.

This linkage is clearly not tied to grammatical shape or function: even if one accepts that Batteux keeps Cicero's discourse priorities, his grammatical are changed as a result. Hence it is not until translation rule 11 that Batteux comes to grammar; and it is here that he shows how he avoids *Latinismes* in French and *Galicismes* in Latin. In a passage that looks forward to Secheyay's *Structure logique de la phrase*, Batteux shows that just as an idea may be expressed by any part of speech, the mere fact that one language may use a certain part of speech does not bind the translator at all if he is to produce a text in conformity with the norms of his own language. In Volume IV of his *Cours* Batteux had already discussed this principle as it applies to word order in an individual language. Within the *pensée*, which corresponds to Vinay and Darbelnet's *unité de traduction*, any grammatical shape is possible. If necessary, the translator is to substitute one grammatical construction for another within the *pensée*, *pourvu qu'il conserve à la pensée le même corps & la même vie*. This he terms *métamorphose*, the *transposition* of moderns like Vinay & Darbelnet and Peter Newmark.

The anonymous English version of 1760 is for once quite unenterprising, calling the technique "alteration". Batteux obviously regards this section as central to his aim of teaching a rhetorically based theory of translation which will produce a natural target text. It is prefaced by a reference to Cicero *De optimo genere oratorum* v. 14, and heavily exemplified, for example:

Itineri paratus & praelio : prêt à la marche & au combat. Cette traduction n'est

point assez française; changeons les substantifs en verbes, prêt à marcher & à combattre. (Batteux 1753 V. 279)

Strangely enough, he does not illustrate from his own Cicero passage, which yields a rich harvest of *métamorphoses*: *quaestione legitima is une question de droit*, the preposition *apud* becomes *au tribunal du*, and the adjectival phrase with its parenthetical clause, *vobis, quemadmodum spero, non molestissimam*, is completely realigned by making the parenthesis a main verb and the adjective a clause subordinate to it, & *dont j'espere que vous ne vous repentirez pas vous-mêmes*.

Where other rhetoricians and grammarians of the period had regarded grammar as the major structural principle of language, Batteux clearly gives that function to discourse, and subordinates grammar to it, claiming that grammar is the particular at the service of the universal, and the artificial at the service of the natural. The immediate result is the down-grading of grammar from an organising principle of language to the handmaid of expression. Therefore Batteux finds it easy to incorporate into his theories of language the Latin rhetorician's concept of *consuetudo*, or proper use of language according to the conventions. Thus Latinisms and Gallicisms are not merely linguistic entities in the narrow sense, they are social and behavioural as well.

In some ways Batteux is not unlike modern functionalists: in his eyes an utterance is an act of expression or communication, and all the rhetorical "extras" like elegance and energy are at the centre of the enterprise, not at the periphery. As a sentence is primarily a vehicle of meaning, universals are to be found in the way meanings are structured, not in the way they are expressed. From these considerations Batteux drew the obvious conclusion: that the predominant role France accorded grammar as the natural principle of language organisation was misguided. In rhetorical quarters, a rather popular doctrine, it would seem from the longevity of Batteux's work. By the consequent undercutting of the much pressed claim that French was superior to Latin by reason of its natural grammar, Batteux also flew in the face of the eighteenth-century flexing of the linguistic muscles of French, and, as we have seen, he was well aware of what he was doing. But in the long run, the grammatical establishment seems to have had its revenge and Batteux remains an interesting footnote in the history of both linguistics and translation.



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