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FIFTY YEARS OF TRANSLATION: THE INDEX TRANSLATIONUM COMPLETES HALF A CENTURY

The *Index Translationum* which this year officially celebrates fifty years of existence, could be likened to a dowager duchess hiding her age. For although the Index officially came into being as a UNESCO publication in 1948, its real life predates that of the Organization since it first saw the light of day under the aegis of the League of Nations in 1932.

A unique publication, *the Index Translationum,* which is published in Paris by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, is an international bibliography of translated works published in the world. Through this list which serves as a reference work, UNESCO provides both scholars and the general public with an irreplaceable tool for making bibliographical inventories of translations on a global scale.

A Chequered History...

The *Index Translationum* first came out in 1932 in the form of a quarterly bulletin published by the League of Nations. It listed the translations published in six countries: Germany, Spain, United States of America, France, United Kingdom and Italy. The number of countries featured in the *Index* had increased to 14 by the time publication ceased in January 1940 due to the outbreak of World War II. Almost ten years were to elapse before the *Index Translationum* re-appeared under the auspices of UNESCO. The project to resume publication was the subject of a recommendation put forward by the Conference of Allied Ministers of Education held in London on 28 June 1945. The *Index* thus predates the Organization itself and can be said to be UNESCO's oldest programme.

The first volume of the new series appeared in 1948. It contained 8570 entries from 26 countries including Brazil, Canada, Chile, Egypt and Turkey. Ever since the Index Translationum has been published annually. The last volume to be published on paper was number 39, which covered 60,543 references from 56 countries. In 1993, keeping abreast of

technological progress, the *Index* changed over from print to CD-ROM. Users can now take advantage of cumulative data built up since 1979, the year in which the *Index* was computerised. This anniversary edition, for example, contains almost one million entries from over 100 countries ranging from Albania to Zimbabwe. It covers every subject, including agriculture, architecture, art, biography, economics, education, geography, exact, natural and social sciences, history, law, literature, management, medicine, philosophy, psychology, religion, science and technology, sport... Almost 200,000 authors are listed and 400 languages are mentioned. Every bibliographic entry carries the following information: author's name, translated title of the work, translator's name, publisher's name, year of publication, number of pages, the original language, and, in many cases, the original title. The subject matter is arranged to the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) headings. Today some 60,000 new bibliographic references find their way into the Index each year.

A Babel of Languages

Translation exists because humanity speaks in many tongues. Why should human beings speak thousands of different, mutually incomprehensible languages? One of the most central questions in the study of man's cerebral and social evolution continues to baffle researchers and anthropologists alike.

"Why does *Homo Sapiens*, whose digestive track has evolved and functions in precisely the same complicated ways the world over, whose biochemical fabric and genetic potential are, orthodox science assures us, essentially common, the delicate runnels of whose cortex are wholly akin in all peoples and at every stage of social evolution -- why does this unified, though individually unique mammalian species not use *one* common language?" asks Professor George Steiner in his book *After Babel, Aspects of Language and Translation* (1975).

In fact man speaks in not one or two or half a dozen but over six thousand languages. These living languages themselves are the remnants of a much larger number spoken in the past. In many parts of the world the language map is a mosaic each of whose stones, some of them minuscule, is entirely or partially distinct from all others in colour and texture.

For Mexico and Central America alone almost 200 languages have been listed not to

speak of the veritable kaleidoscope that makes up the Asian and African linguistic landscape. Aba, an Altaic idiom spoken by Tartars is the first entry in the language catalogue which ends with Zyriene, a Finno-Ugariatic speech used between the Urals and the Arctic shore. Barriers erected by linguistic differences have often led to mutual contempt, hatred and strife between communities. In Asia, Africa or South America language differences have prevented communities from coming together to fight economic isolation, from pooling their energies against foreign invaders. Deprived of their own language by conquerors and colonisers, many cultures have been stunted, never recovering a vital identity.

This multiplicity of tongues has, throughout the ages, captured the religious and philosophic imagination. Among the Gnostics there are two main lines of conjecture: that God, in creating the Earth made an error which resulted in the scattering of languages or that the divisions erected by languages are a form of divine punishment. The occult tradition even holds that a single primal language, an *Ur-Sprache* lies behind the cacophonous dissonance of clashing tongues. It is via the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716), and more recently J.G.Hamann, that language mysticism enters the current of rational linguistic study.

To Translate Or Not To Translate...

The key question that linguistic theory poses is whether or not translation, especially between different languages is possible at all. The universalist view, is that the underlying structure of language is universal and common to mankind, that the differences are essentially superficial. Translation is realisable precisely because those deep seated universals, genetic, historical, social, from which all grammars derive can be located and recognised as operative in every human idiom, however singular or bizarre its superficial forms. To translate is to descend beneath the exterior disparities of two languages in order to bring into vital play their analogous, and, at the final depths, common principles of being. Here the universalist position touches closely upon the mystical intuition of a lost primal or paradigmatic speech.

The opposing view is the belief that real translation is impossible:

What is translation? On a platter
A poet’s pale and glaring head,
A parrot’s screech, a monkey’’s chatter,
And profanation of the dead.
–Vladimir Nabokov, "On Translating *Eugene Onegin*"

What passes for translation is a convention of approximate analogies, a rough-cast similitude, just tolerable when the two relevant languages are cognate, but altogether spurious when remote tongues and far-removed sensibilities are in question. Most linguists and translators find themselves vacillating between these two extremes.

Perhaps the most beautiful, profound, concentrated and acute commentary on the act of translation itself has been offered by the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges in his story *Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote* (1939) in which Menard, in 1918, sets himself the task of total translation or transubstantiation. Three centuries after the original was written, his aim is not to make a mechanical copy of the original. His intention is to produce a few pages which would coincide, word for word, line for line with those of Miguel de Cervantes. His approach to the task, says Professor Steiner, "was one of utter mimesis... i.e. to put oneself so deeply in tune with Cervantes" being as to re-enact, inevitably, the exact sum of his realisations and statements. The arduousness of the game is dizzying... In other words, any genuine act of translation is, in one regard at least, an endeavour to go backwards up the escalator of time and to re-enact voluntarily what was a contingent motion of spirit... To repeat an already extant book in an alien tongue is the translator’s "mysterious duty"... difficult past human imagining."

The *New York Times* once described Gregory Rabassa, who has brought us the books of Gabriel Garcia Marquez in English as "the finest translator who ever drew breath". When a translator comes very close to replicating the original in both letter and spirit, he becomes almost a mirror-reflection of the author. Needless to say, such occasions are extremely rare.

Bridging Cultures

Translation is perhaps as old as writing itself. Throughout the centuries translators have been

attempting to bridge cultures and break down barriers between nations, continents and civilisations. They have brought the past close to the present, semantically conquering time and space. They have been instrumental in propagating religious beliefs and cultural values. They have played a crucial role in shaping the history of mankind. A rough and ready division runs through the history and practice of translation and there is hardly a treatise on the subject which does not distinguish between the translation of common matter --private, commercial, clerical, ephemeral-- and the recreative transfer from one literary, philosophic or religious text to another.

In the annals of religious translations the name of Saint Jerome, the patron saint of translators, is written in letters of gold. He was the first person to translate the Bible into Latin and the Old Testament directly from the Hebrew into Latin. But he had several other comrades in arms such as Wulfila who evangelised the Goths, Cyril who has given his name to the Cyrillic alphabet. The incredible expansion of Buddhism which spread from India to China, Japan and other parts of South East Asia is due to very early rudimentary translations dating back to the 1st century although the first systematic rendering of Buddhist texts into Chinese was undertaken by Kumarajiva in the Vth century.

There is no aspect of our life, scientific, historical, cultural, literary or social which has not been affected by the hand of the translator. Today with the world shrinking into a "global village", the need for translation is more keenly felt than ever. "To speak a language, "said Frantz Fanon" is to take on a world, a culture." In seeking to transport words or texts from one language into another the translator cannot merely search for equivalent words in the "target language" to render the meaning of the "source". He has to be attentive to the larger cultural context whence they spring and which they express. As the expression of a culture, a means of communication, a language emerges to serve the community that uses it. Language evolves with the community, keeping in step with new economic, social and cultural developments, being the vehicle for the expression of changing needs, ideologies and philosophies. The influence a language wields derives from the wealth, economic, political intellectual or cultural, of the community to which it belongs.

A language which clings rigidly to its past, refusing, for the sake of purity, to adapt to the constantly changing and growing world, inevitably gets left behind. The linguistic landscape has been forged by the historical process. Sanskrit or Ancient Egyptian, the

languages of two of the greatest civilisations the planet has known have almost disappeared and have ceased to exist as "living languages".

The craft of the translator is deeply ambivalent. The translator "re-experiences" the evolution of language itself. Our age, our personal sensibilities, writes Octavio Paz, are immersed in the world of translation, or more precisely, in a world which is itself a translation of other worlds, of other systems.

Shaking Off Colonial Shackles

The question of colonialism is inherent in any discussion of translation and Third World writers are increasingly expressing their fears about how their works are translated and "appropriated" by the West. The process of translation in making non-western cultures comprehensible and available in the West entails the exercise of colonial power and proceeds in a predictable direction – alien cultural forms are recuperated via a process of familiarisation – whereby they are denuded of their foreignness and radical inaccessibility. Another exercise of Western power has to do with what and who gets translated. This has to do with the selection of certain voices, certain views, certain texts over others by the publishing industry and by reviewers and critics.

Edward W. Said remembers the time an American publisher told him "The problem is that Arabic is a controversial language". Of all the major world literatures, he says, Arabic remains relatively unknown and unread in the West for reasons that are unique, even remarkable, at a time when tastes for the non-European are more developed than ever before and, even more compelling, contemporary Arabic literature is at a particularly interesting juncture...There almost seems to be a deliberate policy of maintaining a kind of monolithic reductionism where the Arabs and Islam are concerned."

Comments social anthropologist Talal Assad: "From the coloniser's standpoint the issue is not whether the colonised writer is "modern" but whether he or she is "good enough" to be accorded serious critical attention as part of what is called modern world culture. Rightly or wrongly it is the coloniser who has the power to make this judgement. And even if a novel like Tahar Ben Jalloun's *La nuit sacrée* is described both as "resister and liberator" it is the Prix Goncourt (France's most prestigious literary prize) that locates it unequivocally

within modern world culture."

Tahar Ben Jalloun himself is disappointed at the treatment meted out to several of his Moroccan contemporaries writing in Arabic: "They are almost never translated. For some reason, the West feels that only the Egyptians or Lebanese are worth translating from the Arabic into modern European languages. If you do not use the language of the coloniser your chances of being translated into other modern European languages are very low."

Rapid Growth

Nevertheless there is an increasing demand for translation. Just how hungry the world is for knowledge of the other, for exchange of every kind is evident from the spectacular growth in the number of translations published each year.

The *Index Translationum* grew rapidly, reflecting the development of publishing activity world-wide. The de-colonising process was under way and more and more countries joined the United Nations system as independent sovereign States. Enhanced levels of education, increased cultural exchange and the need, the desire to know and understand "the other" were other factors which contributed to the *Index Translationum''s* rapid growth.

Thanks to continuing international co-operation the *Index Translationum* remains a work tool that is unique in the world. Each year national libraries or bibliography centres in the participating countries send UNESCO bibliographical data concerning translated books in all fields of knowledge. Periodicals, articles from periodicals, patents and brochures are not included.

Who Uses the Index?

Librarians, documentalists, researchers, publishers, journalists, translators, students, book shops, all consult the *Index Translationum* to find out if an author has been translated, into what language and by whom. Furthermore, the *Index* is the best reference work for establishing statistics concerning translations, allowing specialists to analyse international readership and publishing markets according to their needs. It is a huge storehouse of information from which we can determine trends such as: changes in the tastes of the

international reading public, the most frequently translated authors, the influence of certain languages over others, reciprocal influences or subject preferences at regional or international levels.

UNESCO's sector for Culture is in charge of gathering, normalizing, entering and checking the data. It is also responsible for constantly updating the *Index Translationum* database. At the Organization's headquarters in Paris, a small team of professionals painstakingly enters titles sent in by contributing Member States. Sometimes the data received is incomplete and inconsistencies cannot always be avoided. It is slow, careful, precise work. "Of course with the data that we have we cannot say anything about the quality of the translation, whether it is faithful to the original, if it seeks to subvert, oversimplify or manipulate," says Cristina Iglesias, who heads the unit.

Historic Change

The most powerful and earth-shaking change that has taken place over the past decade is indubitably the fall of the former Soviet empire. The fall of the Berlin Wall swept away an ideology that had held sway over the imaginations of several million people across the globe for over six decades. Its reverberations have been felt strongly in the field of translations. For a long time Lenin regularly topped the charts as the most translated author of all time. He has now been dethroned by none other than one of the most assiduous and zealous fighters of communism: Walt Disney, the emblematic figure of western capitalism.

The fall of the Berlin Wall has resulted in many changes. Certain types of books were proscribed in the former Soviet Union. Anything to do with lifestyle, management, health and fitness, romance or pornography was frowned upon. There has been a remarkable surge in the translation of books on all these subjects, especially computer technology, management, health guides and romance. Mills and Boon or Harlequin romances are being translated with increasing frequency. These books were banned because they were considered decadent. The newly emerging Eastern democracies are making up for lost time with a vengeance.

Source : http://cdrom.ub.uib.no/cd-net/Itrans/INDEX1.htm